

桜庭一樹

GOSICKIT

—ゴシック—その罪は名もなき

角川ビーンズ文庫

Gosick - Volume 02 - The Crime Without a Name

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I am not a criminal

Be off with you, and don't come home without the flowers.

[Samuil Marshak](#). "The Month-Brothers." Trans. Thomas P. Whitney.

prologue — I am not a criminal

Something strange—golden, round, and shimmering—glittered in the darkness.

In a tiny, cramped room deep inside a large mansion, enshrouded by loneliness so acute that it could slice open your cheeks, Cordelia looked down upon an unfamiliar object: golden, round, and shimmering.....

What is it?

Curls as soft as cotton candy hung against Cordelia's cheeks. She was a petite and dainty maid. The heavy iron candlestick she grasped was quite unsuited to her hands, which were small and chubby like a child's.

The candle's faltering orange flame brightened the floor of the dark room ever so faintly.

The strange object was lying on the floor.

Cordelia reached out and hesitantly lifted it up.

It's pretty!

It was smooth, and when she held it up to her face to take a close look, she saw that it was round and flat, and that someone's profile was engraved onto it. There were numbers written on it, too. What could it be?

The candlelight quivered, stirred by Cordelia's stifled breaths. The

strange thing gleamed in time with the flickering flame.

Why, I've never seen something so pretty in my life!

Cordelia's eyes sparkled as she stroked the strange thing with her fingertips over and over again. The strange thing gleamed even more, as if feeling happy to be caressed. While she was staring at it, enraptured, something else caught her eye, and she lifted the candlestick up over the floor.

To her right and to her left—

In front of her and behind her—

She lit up the floor that lay submerged in the shadows.

One, two, three.

Cordelia's expression turned awestruck.

There are so many of these weird things! All over the floor!

Cordelia carefully knelt down and warily stretched out her hand. The strange things were littered all over the floor. The round, golden objects quietly reflected the flame of the candle, dying Cordelia's small, lovely face in gold.

It's treasure! So much treasure! And it's so pretty!

Cordelia began to happily scoop up the strange things, but there were too many of them for her to carry. Unease gradually spread through her tiny face. Her hands went limp, and the strange things spilled through her fingers and onto the floor with a tinkling sound.

What are they? Why are they on the ground? And there should be someone here.... Where did that person go?

She slowly looked around herself.

Darkness had swallowed up the room, as if someone had stained it in black ink.

In a trembling voice, Cordelia called out that person's name, but there was no answer. The pitch blackness consumed the girl's tiny voice. Her red lips grew taut.

The flame of the candle hissed and swayed.

one

chapter one — Victorique de Blois is a Grey Wolf

[1]

On a sunny afternoon, a gentle spring breeze fluttered the bright green leaves of the ivies that twined around the wood-framed houses lining the road. It was close to the beginning of summer, said to be the most pleasant time of year in this region, and the sky was clear as far as the eye could see.

It was that kind of idyllic day.

The door of a small, ivy-wreathed post office on a village street corner swung open, and a young Asian boy of slight build bounded outside. He was dressed in the uniform—complete with hat worn dutifully upon his head—of St. Marguerite’s School, an elite institution patronized by aristocratic families, established at the foot of the mountains nearby.

With lips pursed in a solemn expression, and his head held up high, the boy—Kazuya Kujou—walked through the village, muttering under his breath. “...I asked for a book, not money. I wonder why he sent me pocket money? Maybe he missed my last letter. Hmm...”

He was holding an envelope stamped with international postage.

“What should I do with this... Oh, well. I should just go back to school in the meantime....”

As Kazuya walked along, brooding to himself, the door to a small general store opened onto the road. A tall girl wearing the same uniform of St. Marguerite’s School slowly walked outside, carrying a shopping bag. She was an attractive young girl with short blond hair and long slim legs, and looked grown-up for her age. When she spotted Kazuya walking ahead of her, a smile lit up her face.

“Hey, Kujou!”

Spooked by the sudden loud voice, Kazuya jumped into the air, yelping. His cry startled the girl in turn, and she gave a yelp of her own and jumped back. Then she puffed her cheeks up in a pout and glared at him.

“Geez! Don’t shout like that. You scared me.”

“Oh, Avril, it’s you...”

The girl—Avril Bradley—continued to pout, clearly displeased by Kazuya’s reaction. But before long, her smile returned, and she asked, “What’s that you have there? A letter?”

“Yeah. You know—whoa, Avril!”

Avril snatched the envelope from Kazuya’s hand, and casually peeked inside. “Ooh, pocket money!”

“Yeah... My brother sent it to me.”

“Lucky you! My parents are awfully stingy. Even though I’m a girl, and have so many things to buy.”

“Huh... Hmm?” Kazuya grunted noncommittally, inwardly baffled by her mysterious words—what did being a girl have to do with it?

Avril held onto the envelope for a few more moments, an envious look on her face, then finally handed it back to Kazuya reluctantly. After this, she smiled again. “Say, what are you going to buy with that?”

“Huh? I, I don’t know. I already have my textbooks, and I brought my clothes, my daily necessities, and everything else I need from home. And besides... Hey? What’s wrong, Avril?” Kazuya asked nervously. She was glaring at him for some reason.

Avril put both hands on her hips. “But there’s a difference between what someone *needs* and what someone *wants*, right?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, Kujou, you are such a stick in the mud.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Time for Auntie Avril to impart a little bit of wisdom. I shouldn’t have to say this, but the joy of shopping comes from looking at everything and trying to decide what to buy!”

“I don’t know about that. Isn’t it enough just to buy what I need and get in and out as quickly as possible?”

“You’ve got it all wrong. Shopping is supposed to be fun!”

“You think so?” Kazuya tilted his head doubtfully.

Avril was getting progressively more irritated by his non-responses. In a firm tone, she said, “That reminds me. There’s a place I want to bring you. Come on!”

“Um, but...”

“What’s this? Why aren’t you moving? You had better come along, or I’ll be cross with you.”

“...I apologize, ma’am.”

Kazuya was starting to get a bad feeling about this, but Avril wasn’t about to take no for an answer, and she proceeded to drag him unwillingly in the opposite direction from the school.

The year was 1924 in the Kingdom of Sauvure, a small European country proud of their ancient traditions. Despite its tiny size, Sauvure had emerged victorious from the Great War at the start of the century, and had come to be known as the “Little Giant” of Western Europe. Stretching from north to south in a long shape reminiscent of a tower, its border with France lay next to bountiful vineyards; the Gulf of Lyon, famous as a playground for the rich, sat astride the Italian border; and gently rolling highlands next to a tall mountain range surrounded the border with Switzerland.

If the Gulf of Lyon was the elegant entrance to this small but wealthy nation, then the Alps could be called its secret attic room

nestled in the deepest recesses of the country. And it was this secret place that had been chosen as the inconspicuous location for a certain school.

This was St. Marguerite's School. Built in a relaxing environment, surrounded by greenery, the school was housed in a stately stone building that would appear shaped like the letter U if seen from the air. Here they boasted of their own traditions, which while not as old as those of the country itself, were nonetheless very old indeed. Admissions were restricted to the children of nobles, and the school maintained a policy of absolute secrecy, allowing no outsiders to step foot on the premises.

However, after the close of the Great War, St. Marguerite's School began to allow worthy students from allied countries to enroll.

Kazuya Kujou, from an island country in the Far East, had distinguished himself both academically and in his irreproachable moral conduct. The youngest son of a military man, his two older brothers also led successful lives: his eldest brother was a scholar, and his second eldest brother was pursuing a career in government. And since Kazuya was himself an excellent student as well as exceedingly sober-minded for a boy his age, his recommendation into the program was all but guaranteed.

But although Kazuya left his country bursting with hopes and dreams, what awaited him in Sauvure were only the prejudices of his privileged classmates, and the craze for ghost stories that infested the school. Unable to fit into his new school, he instead ended up embroiled in strange cases and making strange friends, and had spent the past half year undergoing many trials in his life as a foreign student....

“...So this couple was driving their car late at night through a forest, and some shiny, silvery thing passed them. When they looked out of the window, they saw ... a suit of armor running at full speed!”

“...Sounds scary.”

“And what’s more, the moment it overtook their car, it slowly turned back to look at them. But the suit of armor was...”

“Anyway, sure is nice weather today.”

“...completely empty, with no one inside! Aaaaaaaaaah!”

“Waaaaaaaaah!”

“Ha, ha, ha! You screamed again, Kujou! Scaredy-cat! Kujou’s a scaredy-cat! Ha, ha, ha!” Avril laughed gleefully.

Kazuya walked beside her, grumbling in chagrin. “I told you, it’s not because of your story, but only because you startled me by screaming all of a sudden.”

“There you go again!”

“It’s the truth! Besides, you should know there’s no such thing as ghosts.”

“Whaaat? Yes, there are!”

“Then, have you ever seen one?”

“Well, no, but I heard from a friend of a friend of a friend...”

As they chatted together enthusiastically, a wagon drawn by a shaggy-maned horse slowly passed the two of them.

Rows of wooden houses lined both sides of the road, their white walls overgrown with coils of dark green ivy. Geraniums decorated the windowsills, appearing from afar like blazing red dots that swayed in the calm breeze. The gentle scent of earth and grass lingered in the air, likely from the sprawling vineyards on the outskirts of the village.

It was a season filled with quiet and contentment.

The townspeople were gradually starting to fill the road with afternoon traffic. Kazuya and Avril continued walking leisurely, arguing about the existence of ghosts.

Just when Avril was nearing defeat by an unusually fierce Kazuya, she sulkily added, “But ... it would be so much more fun if ghosts really did exist.”

“That’s not the point. Anyway—”

“That friend of yours, what’s her name, Vi ... Victorique, right? I heard a rumor that she’s not actually human, but a legendary grey wolf. If you thought of your friend as a legendary grey wolf, wouldn’t that just fill you with excitement?”

“Not in the least! And what’s wrong with those people, spreading rumors like that? That’s disrespectful.”

Kazuya had reason to protest. Thanks to the rumors that had labeled him the “Grim Reaper,” he had spent these past several months mostly unable to make friends, and facing one trial after another. No matter how popular these stories were at school, there was no way he could ever bring himself to enjoy them.

Avril pouted. “Gosh, Kujou. You take everything so seriously.”

“Ugh...” Kazuya had opened his mouth, about to retort, but ended up dejectedly closing it again.

In the Far Eastern island country where he had been born and raised, boys were taught to keep silent rather than prattle on unnecessarily. Kazuya agreed with this, and had endeavored to follow this discipline even if he sometimes had to force himself to do so. But since he came to Sauvure, he found that the expectations here could be quite different. Avril Bradley, the transfer student from England whom he had befriended, would often mock him for being too serious and inflexible. And his other friend—who also happened to be a girl—would abuse him on a daily basis, calling him a half-witted savant and a mediocre person. He found none of this remotely amusing.

“Oh, Kujou. We’re here!”

Avril cheerfully pointed ahead, utterly oblivious to the torment and outrage seething inside of Kazuya.

He looked up at the crowds gathered in the public square at the intersection of the two roads that crisscrossed the village. The area had been transformed into an open-air market, overflowing with wares and jam-packed with shoppers.

“Today is the monthly flea market. I’ve been saving up my money just to come here.”

“Oh!”

Avril yanked Kazuya’s hand, leading him into the center of the flea market.

He saw rows upon rows of stalls displaying a huge variety of products. Quite a few secondhand vendors had made the trip especially for this occasion, selling everything from antique dolls that looked like they had been made in the previous century, to charming tableware sets. Local girls who seemed to be around the same age as Kazuya and Avril giggled amongst themselves as they hawked handmade herbal soap and bouquets of potpourri. Elderly saleswomen wearing warm smiles looked after shops selling colorful scarves tinted with natural dyes.

While Kazuya was in the middle of reeling from the vast array of goods, he felt a tug on the hem of his uniform.

“Hey, honey, come here! Come look at what I got! Hey, honey!” called out a flirtatious voice.

When Kazuya turned around, sitting there was a young nun wearing a cumbersome-looking habit—not at all the type of person he was expecting to see when he heard that voice.

“Come on, hon! Take a look!”

“O-okay...”

Avril, who had been striding purposefully through the market, realized that Kazuya was no longer following behind her, and quickly turned around. When she recognized the stall that was in front of him, her expression turned joyful. “Oh! That’s the church bazaar!” she cried out.

“Is it?”

“Yeah. Let’s buy something here, Kujou. I heard that the church bazaars resell stuff that the parishioners donate, so their prices are lower than the other stalls. And just look at all the cute stuff in this one!”

True to Avril’s words, the wares spread out before the nun included delicate handmade lace, sparkling glass bowls, and antique rings—items that looked a little old-fashioned, but were lovely enough for even a boy to appreciate.

Kazuya gravely surveyed the display, until at last an idea seemed to strike him.

“...Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Huh, really?” replied Avril, slightly surprised.

Kazuya eyed the goods for sale with a look of utmost concentration. “Mm-hmm... Although I don’t really know what I should get...”

He looked up at the nun who was acting as the shop-girl. She seemed to be around eighteen or nineteen years old. Kazuya couldn’t guess the color of her hair underneath her habit, but her narrowed, alert eyes were an unusual shade of blue-grey that he had never seen before. They were lonely eyes. Looking into them felt like he had been wandering in the desert and happened to look up at the sky, and yet they also bore an arresting radiance.

But with that forbidding nun’s habit and those clear eyes, along with the overly familiar way she called out to customers, not to mention the manner in which she was sitting on the wooden box she used as a chair, with her legs spread wide like a man, the overall impression she gave was decidedly incongruous.

And then there was the way she had been very noticeably scratching her head and snorting irritably through her nose. Those behaviors didn’t suit her nun’s habit in the least. And her face—fair-complexioned and dotted with tiny freckles—was the kind that could be called either beautiful or homely depending on the

observer, something which only added to her uniqueness.

“Excuse me....” When Kazuya ventured to speak to the nun, he noticed a odd saccharine smell wafting from her. It was an strange smell not quite the same as perfume....

Oh! Now he knew what it was. This is the smell of wine. But ... why would a Catholic nun smell like alcohol?

Moreover, the tips of the leather shoes that peeked out from under the hem of her habit were dappled with white stains. He didn't know what to make of this nun, who should have been living an austere lifestyle, but instead was smelling like alcohol in the middle of the day, and hadn't even polished her shoes.

“Whaddya want?” she snapped.

Kazuya stuttered, “Uh, well, it's just that... I was wondering if you had anything that would make a nice present for a girl....”

“A girl?!”

“Y-yes,” said Kazuya, now feeling slightly embarrassed. While he fretted to himself, thinking that maybe he should just give up, Avril's face lit up from beside him.

Kazuya picked up a lace collar. “How does this look? I don't really know myself.... Avril, can you stand still for a moment? Oh, and bend down a little. Hmm... A little bit more. Lower. Okay, right about there. She's always sitting down, so I can't really say for sure.... Hmm...”

When Kazuya held the dainty collar up to Avril's neck, at first she couldn't contain her delight. But each time he told her to bend down just a little more, the look on her face began to shift further and further into doubt, until her cheeks were sticking out in a sullen pout. The nun, squatting down in a masculine pose, stared up at her, open-mouthed. But when she at last realized what was going on, she had to stifle her laughter.

Kazuya picked up a small, girlish-looking handbag to examine carefully, then an old-fashioned, but still elegantly-designed ring.

But Avril snatched them out of his hands.

“Wh-what? Avril?”

“These won’t do at all!”

“Really?”

“...Tell me, Kujou. Is this a present for that Vi-whatever her name is?”

“Yes, it is. She isn’t allowed to set foot outside of the school.... I mean, she doesn’t feel like leaving the school. Wait, do you know Victorique?”

“I’ve never actually met her.... but, well...” Avril testily kicked a pebble near her feet. Then she looked up at him, and said, “This would be perfect!”

Avril was holding up a golden skull about the size of her fist.

Before Kazuya had a chance to react, the nun who was watching them gave a startled gasp.

“Wh-what the heck is that? How do you use that?” said Kazuya.

“Like this.” With a completely straight face, Avril placed the skull on top of her head.

“You’re kidding!”

“I’m serious! And this one, too.”

Avril pushed aside some village girls who were eying a stack of postcards, and began to briskly rummage through the pile, until she found a postcard decorated with a swarming horde of mice and held it up.

“...I don’t think so.”

“Then how about this?” Avril picked up a glittering Indian-style turban shaped like a crown. Kazuya couldn’t imagine what it would

look like if someone actually wore it, but it was certainly pretty to look at, like a finely carved sugar sculpture.

While he hesitated, Avril waved it in front of him. “See, it’s pretty. I’m sure she’ll love it.”

“You’re sure...?”

The nun watched Avril getting closer and closer to tears. Finally, out of a sense of pity, or perhaps mischief, she decided to lend her assistance.

“She’s right; that’s a really nice one. I wanted it, too. Too bad I have to sell it.”

“Huh? Really?”

Avril and the nun exchanged a look. Then they simultaneously turned to Kazuya and nodded emphatically.

Kazuya wavered for several seconds.

But he at last ended up buying the strange Indian hat.

There were other, more expensive items at the nun’s church bazaar. The most eye-catching one was a beautiful plate made of [Dresden porcelain](#). A wizened old man in a felt cap spotted the plate, sitting in the position of honor at the back of the stall, and asked the nun how much it was.

Proudly jutting out her chin, she gave her answer. It was such an unexpectedly large number that Kazuya and Avril immediately shot a glance at each other when they heard it. The old man grunted and left, shaking his head.

The village girls who had been looking over the postcards looked up at the nun. “Why is that plate so expensive?”

The nun again answered preeningly, “I’m not completely sure myself, but it seems to be a really old plate. It’s got a pedigree to it,

so that makes it valuable. A parishioner's wife donated it to the church. It's the main attraction for today."

The girls each bought a postcard with a winsome flower and fruit motif, then left, the sounds of their loudly chattering voices gradually fading into the distance. "That plate's so expensive! Who'd want such an old thing like that?"

The old man who had previously asked about the plate apparently wasn't ready to give up, and kept glancing hungrily over at it from afar. He had taken off his felt cap and put it under his arm, and was carrying a small vase that he had bought from one of the other stalls.

"...Hey, kids, how 'bout this?" called out the nun.

When Kazuya and Avril turned around, she was pointing to another one of her goods for sale.

"This is my special recommendation. It's really cute, and the price is right."

"Oh...?"

It was a rectangular box about the size of one's palm—a music box. Avril reached out to touch it curiously.

"You put cards with sheet music inside it, and then it'll play all sorts of songs when you wind it up. See that lever?"

"This one?" Avril rested the music box in her left hand, and turned the lever with her right.

But the very next moment, there was a loud bang and a flash of white, and the music box fell into pieces.

A large white dove had flown out, flapping its wings, soaring into the blue sky.

Avril cried out and fell back several paces, then looked at Kazuya. "Wh-what was that?"

The surrounding townspeople turned startled looks on the two of them. The freed dove flew a couple leisurely laps above the market, then cooed and escaped to parts unknown.

The nun screamed.

All eyes moved to her.

“The plate!” she screeched, holding her hands to her face, her blue-grey eyes wide open.

Kazuya and Avril gasped.

The nun pointed a trembling finger at the spot where the plate had been ... but it was empty. The high-priced plate had vanished into thin air.

The nun staggered back into her chair as if her legs had given out. Avril’s lips quivered from the fright she had received.

Kazuya looked around the market. The girls who had bought the postcards were huddled together a short distance away, squealing to each other. The old man who had expressed interest in the plate was staring over at the stall, looking dumbfounded.

From somewhere, a voice whispered, “Somebody call the police....”

Kazuya was no less stunned than the rest of them, but in the back of his mind, he considered to himself, although it may not have been the most appropriate of thoughts for the situation: *Now this’ll make the perfect present for Victorie....*

two

[2]

In a corner of the sprawling campus, which leisurely stretched out across the gently rolling hills of a mountain valley, stood a massive repository of books, famed throughout Europe—St. Marguerite's Library. This tower of hollow stone, battered by wind and rain for over three hundred years, soared above the school like loftiness given form.

Kazuya walked briskly along the white pebbled path leading from the U-shaped main building to the library, holding the Indian turban in his hand.

"All that fuss back at the market made me much later than usual. I hope she isn't too upset with me...." he murmured aloud.

Then he remembered that that friend of his in the library wouldn't be waiting specifically for him anyway, and there was no point in him worrying about her reaction. And when he further considered that the only time she was ever in a good mood was once in a blue moon to begin with, he had to grimace for a moment.

Kazuya arrived at the entrance to the library. The large leather-covered door, hammered through with round brass rivets, towered imposingly before him. He wrapped both hands around the doorknob and pulled as hard as he could.

The damp, chilly air pervading the inside of the library coolly caressed his cheeks. Hanging in the air was the scent of dust, mildew, and knowledge. As he inhaled it, a feeling of reverence overcame him.

Kazuya lifted his gaze. The four walls of the library were completely covered in overflowing bookshelves. At a glance, they seemed to blend in with the walls, lending it a pattered appearance, but on closer look, the pattern was in fact made up of books. An atrium occupied the space between the walls, and far above it, sublime

religious frescoes were painted on the ceiling. High in the distance, Kazuya caught a faint glimpse of large, bright green leaves. But most people would have dismissed it as an optical illusion, with nary an inkling that what they were seeing was in fact the beautiful green leaves of tropical trees at the very top of the library, almost to the ceiling.

The vaguely menacing shadows at the far end of the first floor atrium hid a hydraulic elevator, which had been installed within the past couple decades over the course of renovations. However, it was officially limited to staff use only, and there was only one member of the student body allowed to use it— for Kazuya, it was off-limits.

The only way for him to get to the top was by means of a narrow wooden staircase that stretched precariously between the enormous bookshelves on each wall. The thin staircase soared to the ceiling through a series of right angles, onward and upward like a huge vertical labyrinth.

A sigh escaped Kazuya's lips. "It sure is far...."

As he peered up at the wooden railing that encircled the top floor, he could just barely make out the sight of something dangling over the side.

Something that shone like a golden belt.

A girl's long hair...

"Well, at least she seems to be here. No choice but to keep on going."

Kazuya straightened his posture and began to climb, the soles of his shoes tapping rhythmically against the steps of the cramped wooden staircase. If he were to look down, his head would spin, so he silently ordered himself to keep his eyes facing forward no matter what.

According to legend, this library was built in the early seventeenth century by a former king of Sauvure. In order to escape his wife's

henpecking, he had a secret room constructed at the top floor where he could engage in clandestine trysts with his young mistress. And to make sure that no one but the two lovers would ever go to the top, he had the staircase designed in the form of a maze.

There certainly couldn't be many people willing to climb all the way to the top, thought Kazuya. Although if someone had a good enough reason, it'd be a different story....

Occupied with these thoughts, he climbed.

And climbed.

And climbed some more.

Still more stairs to go.

It wouldn't be long now.

He was starting to get tired.

Finally, he reached the top. Slightly out of breath, he called out the name of the friend whom he expected to find.

“Victorique? You there?”

There was no response.

But it was always this way.

Kazuya took one more step. He was very familiar with what lay in store for him beyond that point.

For what awaited him was...

...a garden.

The secret room at the topmost floor of the library was no longer the bedroom of a king and his lover, but had instead been repurposed as a lush conservatory. Tropical trees, ferns, and flowers

in gaudy primary colors bloomed in green anarchy, softly swaying in the breeze that flowed in from opened skylights, accompanied by gentle rays of sunlight.

It was a tiny piece of paradise, awash in serenity.

On the landing that led from the conservatory, a exquisite porcelain doll lay sprawled on the ground. Its body, close to life-sized at around one hundred and forty centimeters, was enveloped in an elaborate gown, richly bedecked in silk and torchon lace. And yet its gloriously long blond hair was neither plaited nor piled up, but cascaded all the way down to the heels of a diminutive pair of leather shoes, twining about the doll's body like a velvet turban come undone.

The expression on its bowed profile was as cool and dispassionate as sculpted porcelain. The eyes could have belonged to an adult or to a child; it was hard to say. The eyelids were heavy and the gaze unfixed, the eyes of someone dreaming at dawn.

This porcelain doll was puffing away at a white ceramic pipe in its mouth. Hazy white smoke drifted up to the skylights.

For a moment, Kazuya paused, transfixed by that scene, like an illusion captured in a photograph. Then he assumed his usual composure and walked up to her, this girl who was as beautiful as a porcelain doll, and nearly every bit as tiny.

"I've been calling you all this time. You ought to answer me back, Victorique."

"...Oh, it's you."

Her lips parted slightly, almost invisibly so. She spoke in a low voice that was husky like that of an old woman, in jarring contrast to the youthfulness of her body. The girl—Victorique—said only these three brief words, then sealed her lips again.

On the floor, opened books radiated around her in all directions. Among their various languages were books in Latin, German, and a wriggly, earthworm-like script which Kazuya guessed to be Arabic.

All appeared to be difficult reading. The genres also ranged widely, including anything from witchcraft and alchemy to science, advanced mathematics, and ancient history.

“Of course it’s me. Who else is going to climb all the way up here?”

“...Sometimes Cécile used to come here, although she hasn’t stopped by lately. It looks like she’s leaving things to you now.”

“Huh.” Kazuya nodded.

“Cécile” referred to his homeroom teacher, who was also the teacher of Avril Bradley and Victorique de Blois. Ever since Kazuya came to study in Sauvure half a year ago, she had been concerned about his inability to find acceptance among his peers, who were children from aristocratic families. At some point, she had introduced him to Victorique, a problem child who had never attended classes in all the time she had been enrolled in this school, and she tasked him with relaying messages and looking after her. Kazuya reluctantly began to visit this strange girl in the library on a regular basis, and ended up getting pulled into various cases that she would then solve. In the process, the two of them had gradually come to know each other. However...

Whenever he visited the library, he would always get fed up with Victorique’s intolerably brusque manner, which she possessed by virtue of her upper crust background, and every time he would silently swear never to come again. But somehow he would always find himself back at this conservatory, over and over again.

Kazuya glanced at the floor next to Victorique. Whiskey bonbons and macarons were scattered all over the ground among stacks of books. He looked over at Victorique, but she was engrossed in her reading, seeming to have forgotten about the sweets that she had brought, as well as everything else around her.

“What a mess you’ve made here. You’re always leaving things lying around like this.” Kazuya started to gather up the scattered sweets into a single pile, muttering complaints under his breath.

But Victorique paid him no mind, and instead asked, “Kujou, do

you believe in the existence of a ‘chosen people’?”

Kazuya jerked his head up, not expecting the sudden change of topic.

Victorique didn’t bother to wait for a response. “I refer to those god-like people who appear in myths. For example, the gods of Greek mythology or the Norse giants. In China, they pass down tales of celestial beings. I suppose your own country has such legends, too.”

“Yeah... Well, I guess so. But aren’t those just fables?”

“If there existed people with great powers who were feared as gods by other races... It would be at least slightly amusing, wouldn’t it?”

Ignoring Kazuya, who was occupied with organizing the candies on the floor, Victorique began to speak swiftly.

“If we look back into the history of Eastern Europe, there are many records of an ancient people known as the Seyrune, a legendary people who held a domain in the war-torn lands of Eastern Europe many centuries ago. They were uniformly small and weak, and few in number, but they controlled that land by means of their intelligence. They fought valiantly with the [Khazars](#) in the ninth century, with the [Pechenegs](#) in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and with the [Kipchaks](#) in the twelfth century, and endured Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century. Their race lived in glory for a long time. The Seyrune survived everything from yearly invaders on horseback in the springtime, to ferocious wolves who lived in the forests, and came to be known as legendary gods.

“But now they are nowhere to be found. There is no such thing as a Seyrune nation. In every book that I’ve read, all mentions of them abruptly cease in the fifteenth century. One day, they simply disappeared like a puff of smoke from the face of Eastern Europe; no, from the face of the earth. Whence did they come, and whither are they vanished? A hint may lie in the fact that the fifteenth century was the era of witch hunts and inquisitions. Kujou, you went to town earlier, didn’t you?”

Kazuya's hands stilled in the act of scooping up stray candies, and he blinked in surprise. "What's gotten into you all of a sudden. Wait, how did you know that?"

"Your behavior is an open book to me."

"...Well, I guessed as much."

A tiny yawn slipped out of Victorique's mouth, and she absentmindedly buried a hand into the pile of sweets that Kazuya had carefully arranged, carelessly rummaging through them until she located a whiskey bonbon. She tore off the wrapping, shoved the bonbon into her mouth, and started chewing, her cheeks pulsating as if they were an independent living creature unattached to the rest of her small face.

Kazuya picked up the wrapping that she had thrown on the floor and searched for a waste bin. When he was unable to locate one, he was forced to resort to depositing the wrapper into his own pocket.

Chewing vigorously, Victorique continued. "For one thing, the leaf stuck to your hair doesn't belong to any of the trees on the school grounds. More importantly, I can see an envelope in the breast pocket of your uniform. And once I saw you in such a rush to get here at this late hour, I knew that you must have gone somewhere after your afternoon classes. That's all. It's an exceedingly simple thing."

"...Yeah. When you put it that way, sure. But you always give me such a start. It's like you can guess everything I do, even when you aren't watching me."

Victorique suddenly looked up, and with her sparkling green eyes, the color of tropical oceans, she pinned Kazuya with a wide-eyed stare.

"It's very simple. An overflowing wellspring of wisdom told it to me. I am honing my senses by taking in fragments of chaos from the world around me, and letting the wellspring of wisdom inside of me toy with them to pass the time. In other words, I reconstruct them. And when the mood strikes me, I may even articulate the process so

that a dull and mediocre person like you may understand. ... Although doing so is much too troublesome, so the times when I would rather not articulate things far outnumber the times when I would. You understand, don't you?"

"There you go again, mocking me, calling me mediocre...."

"Am I not allowed to?" Victorique asked with a flash of her emerald eyes, sounding deeply mystified.

Kazuya shrugged. "Well, I'm pretty much used to it by now."

"Oh, no, we can't have that. Getting used to things leads to where the intellect goes to die. I order you to reflect on your sins."

"Reflect on my sins? Me? Why did this conversation lead to *me* being the one who has to reflect on his sins?" Kazuya replied crossly. Still, he knew he could never truly lose his temper with her.

In the world outside of the top floor of the library tower, Kazuya happened to be an elite student who had been selected as his country's representative, and normally would never have allowed anyone to call him mediocre of all things. But when it came to this eccentric, half-mad little girl who never attended school, and yet read through the most abstruse of tomes in the blink of an eye, somehow he could never quite come up with the words to defend himself.

In fact, Kazuya still knew little about who Victorique was. Some said that she was the illegitimate daughter of a nobleman, and was somehow feared by the rest of her family, and therefore had been sent to this school to avoid leaving her at home. Others said that her mother was a famous dancer, but was not of sound mind. Yet others said that she was the incarnation of a grey wolf. ...There were numerous rumors of dubious veracity spread about her at school, many of them lurid tales of the supernatural, but Kazuya himself had never directly asked Victorique about any of them. This was partly because he believed that viewing a person with such base curiosity was reprehensible, but it was also because Victorique, despite being so very small, possessed such a imperturbably quiet and yet ferocious air that simply being in her presence was

intimidating enough.

Over the past few months, Kazuya felt as if he was spending his days slowly getting closer to a miniature wild animal that was unaccustomed to human contact. Although it was the source of much vexation for him, he somehow always ended up taking the effort to climb up that labyrinth of stairs day after day for the sake of that peculiar young girl.... Such was the life he experienced as a foreign student.

Victorique was still single-mindedly reading her books and chewing her whiskey bonbons. But this was no deterrent to Kazuya, who went on speaking. “Anyway, Victorique. I wanted to ask you about something that happened when I went to the village....”

“You had planned to go to the post office to pick up your mail, I suppose?”

“Yeah. Actually, I had asked my eldest brother to send me a certain book, but it seems like he didn’t get my letter in time, so I ended up getting sent pocket money instead. Apparently, it’s his first paycheck since he started working in the university, so he set aside a little for me, too.”

“Hmm.”

“So, since it’s a special occasion and all, I thought I’d get you a present.”

Victorique wearily lifted her head to glance briefly at the Indian hat that Kazuya was proudly presenting to her. She lowered her eyes back to her books, but then a second later, she did a double take, this time in shock.

“What the devil is that?!”

“What is it? It’s a hat.”

“A hat!? That thing?!”

She seemed to find it more interesting than he had expected. Still, her reaction was more akin to alarm rather than pleasure, which was not exactly what he had had in mind.

Kazuya's shoulders slumped. "...Is it weird?"

"Yes, it's weird!"

"O-oh... If you don't want it, I can go return it."

As Kazuya was dejectedly reaching out to take back the hat, Victorique twisted her body all the way around from her books and snatched the hat away from him, then twisted herself back to her original position and hid the hat on the floor behind her, out of his reach.

Kazuya gave her a dubious frown. "You still want it?"

"I only said it was weird. I never said I didn't want it."

"But ... if it's weird, then I can just go exchange it for something you actually like instead. ...I knew I should've gotten that lace collar, or that pretty ring. Maybe she tricked me. Thinking back, that nun didn't seem quite right in the head...."

While Kazuya was musing out loud, he looked up to find Victorique hunched over the Indian hat, examining it with intense interest like a cat that had found a new toy to play with—he had to admit she looked kind of cute when she did that. But after a minute, she suddenly threw the hat to the side.

"...Sick of it."

"Hold on just a minute. Hats aren't for playing with; they're for wearing. Don't get sick of it when you haven't even tried it on yet."

"I'm bored."

"So like I said—huh? Did you just say you're bored?"

Kazuya felt instantly uneasy, and began making preparations for his escape. He stood up, and started to bid Victorique goodbye, saying,

“Well, I guess it’s time to get back to the dormitory now...”

Victorique gave him a sidelong glance. As he started to walk away, she yanked hard on his trouser cuff.

Kazuya tripped and fell flat on his face. “Ouch!”

“I *said* I’m bored.”

“I heard you! But what do you expect me to do about it? ...Oh, I know!” Kazuya scrambled upright. “I completely forgot about the other present I brought you. While I was buying that hat at the village flea market, a strange theft occurred....”

After Kazuya bought his hat and was about to depart, the nun working at the church bazaar recommended buying a small music box. The moment that Avril picked it up, much to her surprise, the music box fell apart, and a dove flew out. While everyone was watching the dove fly away, an expensive plate on display at the bazaar disappeared into thin air.

The policemen who rushed to the scene naturally proceeded to search all of the customers present, Kazuya and Avril included, but they were proven innocent. The nun cried and begged the police to look for the plate, but in the end, they weren’t able to locate it anywhere in the vicinity.

The commotion caused Kazuya and Avril to be late getting back to school. By the time they returned, it was already after curfew, and they were reduced to standing helplessly in front of the locked iron gates.

When Kazuya suggested finding someone who would let them explain their situation, Avril said, “Let’s go in this way!” and guided him to a hidden passageway that had been secretly opened through the hedge. She had also been locked out after curfew last weekend, and so she had taken a saw and cut several thick branches from the hedge in case it ever happened again. Kazuya protested to her that they shouldn’t be doing this, but she went on to yank him through the hole, back inside the school.

And that was how a leaf that didn't belong to any tree on campus—because it belonged to the hedge—ended up stuck to Kazuya's hair.

“So it's a pretty strange case, huh? The music box was so small that it could fit in the palm of your hand, certainly not big enough for a dove to fit inside. But the second it fell apart, that white dove came flying out. And then that expensive plate disappeared. No one fled the scene, but the plate was still gone....”

“Oh, is that all?” Victorique yawned widely.

Kazuya blinked.

Victorique's weariness was too great for a yawn to suffice, so she added a stretch, and again began to play with the hat.

“What do you mean?”

“There's only one person it could be, Kujou. It was someone right next to you.”

“Really?!”

“What simple fragments these are. I can't even call this chaos. Oh, I'm so bored, I could die. That's just how bored I am. Stupid Kujou.”

“...Ugh.” Kazuya was starting to get irritated, and snapped, “Then how about putting on that hat?”

“Mmm.”

Victorique put on the Indian turban. The crown-shaped hat sat snugly on her head, and her long blond hair flowed out from the back. The size was just right for her small head, and when she wore it, Kazuya thought she looked just like the princess of some faraway desert tribe. He wanted to compliment her on how nice she looked wearing it, but while he was wondering to himself whether that would only get him into trouble, he heard the jarring sound of loud footsteps entering the world below—the footsteps of large feet wearing leather shoes.

Kazuya looked over the railing to the bottom floor. That same

instant, the man in the first floor atrium stopped and locked eyes with him.

Kazuya turned to face Victorique. "He's back."

"...Mm?" A slight frown crossed her brow.

With a heavy clank, the hydraulic elevator began to move.

Victorique stirred slightly.

The iron cage clanged to a loud stop at the small elevator alcove at the front of the conservatory. There was a silhouette of a young man behind the thin metal bars.

The cage opened with a brief screech, revealing a man with a strange hairstyle, standing there in a dramatic pose with one hand in the air and the other hand resting on his hip. He wore a finely tailored three-piece suit and a loud ascot tie. Silver cufflinks gleamed at his wrists. His entire outfit was impeccable, save for the inexplicable exception of his hair. His glossy blond hair was hardened and swept forward like the tip of a drill, as if he was prepared to use it as a deadly weapon.

"I suppose he's here to ask you about that very case," Kazuya murmured softly.

Victorique's response was to open her mouth in a wide yawn of abject disinterest.

The man—Victorique's half-brother, Gréville de Blois, who had abused his position as a nobleman to enter the police force on a whim—strode inside with sprightly steps, his leather shoes clacking loudly against the floor. He faced the two youngsters and said, in a voice brimming with confidence, "Hello, kids, I just wanted to ask you a few..."

His voice trailed off. The assured look on his face slowly turned pale as his mouth dropped open, his eyes bulged out, and his fingers started to tremble as if he had just seen a ghost.

Kazuya looked around in confusion. But all he saw was his petite

friend Victorique, now wearing the Indian hat; the piles of books that surrounded her; the candies scattered on the floor; and the conservatory itself. Everything was in its usual place. There was nothing to startle the inspector into such a ghastly expression.

Inspector de Blois' face was as white as a sheet, his mouth soundlessly flapping open and shut. Finally, he managed to squeak out, "Cordelia Gallo!? What the hell are you doing here?!"

"No, Gréville. It's me," Victorique replied calmly. She took off the Indian hat, letting her silky blond hair tumble down her back.

The inspector's pallid face gradually turned an apoplectic red. "That's a dirty trick!" he hissed, as if indignant at having let his fear show in his voice.

"Hey, who's Cordelia Gallo?" asked Kazuya.

These siblings, who otherwise shared nothing in common, ignored his question simultaneously.

Kazuya's head drooped. "Fine, I won't ask. Tch..."

Victorique continued to puff away on her pipe, paying no attention to Kazuya in his sulk. The inspector pulled out his own pipe and lit the fire.

Two strands of smoke slowly rose to the skylights.

At last, the inspector began to speak in his usual tone of voice.

The light flowing in from the conservatory's skylights slowly darkened, as if a cloud borne on the wind had hidden the sun for a fleeting moment. And then a ray of warm sunlight once again pierced through the gloom, shining on the three below. A delicate breeze wafted inside, briefly swaying the large, heavy leaves of the tropical trees.

"...And that's how the Dresden plate vanished into thin air at the church bazaar. The police searched all of the customers at the

scene, but they came up empty-handed. Of course, that plate is the size of a man's head, so it's not exactly something that anyone could easily hide under his clothes in the first place," said the inspector smoothly, while keeping his gaze directed at Kazuya.

"I was there, so I already know all of that," murmured Kazuya. "Why do you always have to tell me instead of Victorique?"

"What's that? I simply came to hear the testimony of one of the witnesses. There seems to be one other person here, but I can't quite see who it is. Anyway..."

Inspector de Blois reseated himself with his left ear facing Victorique, seemingly preparing himself to listen in case she had anything to say. Sunlight from the skylights glinted off his pointed hair, accentuating its radiant golden color.

Victorique was still absorbed by her reading. Kazuya glanced at the titles; they appeared to be histories of Eastern Europe from antiquity to the Middle Ages, the same topic that she had been expounding on earlier. She busily flipped the pages that were filled with tiny, cramped print.

Then she happened to raise her head and let out an extremely bored yawn. "It's like I told you before, Kujou. The thief is someone who was very close to you."

"Who do you mean?" asked Kazuya, stumped.

Inspector de Blois leaned forward, pushing him aside. "I've got it! You mean that English girl, don't you?!"

"...Why would Kujou's companion be the one to steal the plate? And she submitted to the same search that he did. I'm not talking about her. Someone else was there, right? The only person who didn't undergo a search. Think about it."

After saying her piece, Victorique returned to burying her face in her books. Kazuya and the inspector shared a look, pondering to themselves.

"Someone else... Do you mean the nun?"

“That’s right.” Victorique nodded, then immersed herself back into the world of books, seeming to forget all about the other two people in her presence.

For several seconds of silence, she smoked her pipe. Then she suddenly looked up.

Kazuya and the inspector had been gazing at her with questioning looks, waiting for her to take notice of them. Victorique withdrew the pipe from her mouth, and with her other hand, picked up a macaron lying on the floor, tore off the wrapping, and popped it into her small mouth. She chewed it, rested for a moment, then spoke.

“Why are you staring at me like that?”

“I was waiting for your explanation.”

“You mean you still don’t understand?!” Victorique stared at them in profound shock. Then she took a drag from her pipe, withdrew the pipe to exhale smoke, and reached out to toss another macaron into her mouth. With food still in her mouth, she said, “You two are truly ... idiots.”

“Enough!” yelled Kazuya angrily. Startled, Victorique widened her eyes. As for Inspector de Blois, he was silent, his face purple in rage.

But Victorique was unbothered, and said, “It’s impossible for the thief to be anyone but the nun. At least, according to what you told me, Kujou. Now pay attention. That nun recommended the music box to your companion, and the moment she picked it up, it noisily fell apart. The music box was meant to do that. And at the same time, a white dove flew out of it, distracting all of the townspeople in the plaza so that they would look up at the flying dove in the sky. But it didn’t come from the music box.”

“Then where did it come from?”

“It flew out from the nun’s skirts.”

“H-her skirts...?”

“You said it yourself, Kujou. A nun, who is supposed to behave modestly, was sitting with her legs spread like a man. You found that strange. But she had a reason to be sitting that way. She was hiding something between her legs.”

Kazuya remembered the scene vividly. The nun sat with her legs wide open, her heavy, dark blue habit cloaking her body all the way down to her ankles....

“She most likely had a rack of some sort set up between her legs, where she secreted the dove inside. If a customer were to pick up the music box, she would lift her skirt and release the dove. And if she timed it right to the moment when the music box fell apart, then it would appear as if the dove had flown out from the music box itself. This would distract the townspeople into looking up at the dove, and at that point, she would hide the plate underneath her skirt, then scream, “The plate is missing!””

Kazuya looked at Victorique and the inspector in surprise. “But even so... She was the one managing the bazaar. Why would she steal a plate that she was trying to sell?”

“You would have to ask her that. Still, according to what you said, she was smelling of liquor in the middle of the day. Doesn’t sound like your average, everyday nun, does she? And since those goods were property of the church, she wouldn’t have been able to keep any money she earned from selling them. In that case, it isn’t very strange for her to be a suspect. So, as for what you should do next...”

“Yeah.”

“Check that nun’s habit and shoes very, very carefully. Kujou said that he saw some white spots spattered on her black shoes. From this I can speculate that those were the droppings of the dove that she hid in her skirts. Why else would bird droppings be on her shoes, when they should have been hidden underneath her long habit? I doubt she’ll have a convincing excuse for that.”

Now having said all she needed to say, Victorique yawned listlessly. Then she stretched, prompting tears to spring to the corners of her

eyes, and went back once again to the land of books.

Kazuya glanced furtively at the inspector next to him. By now, he would normally be in the process of leaving after getting the answers he wanted, but this time he was sitting with his arms crossed and a grim expression on his face, apparently contemplating something.

“...Inspector? What’s wrong?”

“You win.”

“Huh?”

“Uh, no... Never mind!” the inspector said nervously. He stood up and slowly began walking to the elevator.

Then he turned around and began to say something. But he seemed to reconsider and closed his mouth, vanishing into the bowels of the iron cage.

“Inspector?”

He didn’t reply.

The elevator jerked into motion with a metallic clang, and began to descend to the floors below.

A few minutes later, Kazuya heard the sound of Inspector de Blois’ footsteps quickly departing from the first floor atrium. When the sound grew softer and finally faded away into silence, he turned to Victorique. “By the way.”

“...Mm?”

“Who is Cordelia Gallo? That name gave the inspector such a fright. But why?”

Victorique promptly turned her back to him and thrust her face into a book. Kazuya sucked his teeth, then picked up a stray macaron and threw it into his mouth.

The sun was slowly setting. The wind had stopped blowing, and the quiet sounds of rustling leaves had stilled.

A thin white wisp of smoke trailed up from the pipe in Victorique's mouth to the skylights.

Kazuya sat quietly, letting the tranquil silence, which permeated the conservatory on the top floor like that of a heavenly plane for the past three hundred years, wash through him....

three

[3]

The next morning, Kazuya woke up in his room in the boys' dormitory of St. Marguerite's School at precisely his usual waking time.

In the student dormitories, every private room was luxuriously arrayed for the comfort of the noble-born students. The beds and desks were crafted from the finest mahogany. Beautifully embroidered silk curtains hung in front of the closets, the washbasins were made of polished brass, and the floors were covered in the plushiest of carpets.

Since each boy had a room to himself, it was typical for the rooms to be somewhat messy, but Kazuya's was the only one guaranteed to be spotlessly clean at all times. If, heaven forbid, a single piece of trash were to fall on the floor, he would immediately pick it up and place it into the waste bin.

True to his morning routine, Kazuya woke up, washed his face, changed, arranged the contents of his book bag, and walked down to the first floor dining hall with perfectly straight posture. Since the rest of the boys were used to sleeping in until the last minute, at this time of morning it was typical for Kazuya to be the only one having breakfast, along with no more than two or three other students on the busiest days.

The distractingly voluptuous red-headed housemother sat, legs crossed, on a wooden stool in a corner of the room. She was reading the morning newspaper, a cigarette hanging from her lips and a frown wrinkling her brow. When she saw Kazuya come in, she got up from her seat and served him his breakfast of bread, fruit, and lightly sautéed ham.

After Kazuya thanked her and began to eat, she noticed him glancing back in her direction. "Wanna read it?" she asked drowsily, and handed him her newspaper.

As Kazuya ate his breakfast, he carefully scanned the newspaper. Then he put his head to the side musingly. “Huh? That’s odd....”

The headline concerned the theft of the Dresden plate that Victorique had just solved yesterday. Normally, Inspector de Blois would have taken the credit for himself as soon as he found out who the culprit was, but strangely enough, this time the headline read:

{Famed Inspector de Blois Admits Defeat!
Dresden Plate Missing, Whereabouts Unknown}

The headline seemed to imply that the nun who had stolen the plate was still on the loose.

“That’s strange. He always catches them right away so he can make a splash in the papers the next morning. I wonder what happened?”

Kazuya also recalled how the inspector had been acting somewhat strangely right before he left yesterday. His face had gone purple and he had been unusually quiet, but also looked as if he had something he wanted to say....

“Hey, Kujou!”

Kazuya looked up, and saw the housemother beckoning him from her seat in the corner, as she sat cross-legged and smoked her cigarette.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“See the classifieds on the last page? I always make sure to read those.”

“Why is that?”

“Cause they’re interesting. You might find ads looking for daughters who ran away from home, or from people looking for work, and sometimes fishy ones that sound like shady business. Go on, take a look at today’s.”

Kazuya skimmed over the area where the housemother was

pointing.

And then he raised his eyebrows.

There he saw:

{To the children of the Grey Wolves:
The midsummer festival is approaching. All descendants are
welcome.}

The rest of the advertisement consisted of a simple set of directions to the small town of Horowitz near the Swiss border.

“...I wonder what this is all about?”

“I haven’t the foggiest notion. Still, the ‘grey wolves’ are legendary in Sauvure. You know how every country has their own set of folktales, like vampires or abominable snowmen? Well, in Sauvure, we’ve always heard stories about quiet grey wolves who live in remote mountain valleys where the elm forests grow,” she went on excitedly. “Grey wolves are supposed to be much, much smarter than people. So whenever there’s a child born who’s a mite too clever, people might say the mother birthed a wolf cub, and try to drive her out of the village. Well, I’m talking about a long time ago, of course.”

“Hmm...?” Kazuya thought of the rumors that referred to Victorique as the incarnation of a grey wolf. He had always wondered why, but thanks to the housemother’s explanation, he felt like he understood a little bit better now.

So the problem could be boiled down to being too smart, then...

“...Oh, g’morning,” the housemother muttered, looking up at the blue-blooded children who had belatedly climbed out of bed and come down for breakfast.

Whenever they happened to catch sight of Kazuya, they quickly looked away and silently sat down on the other side of the room. But he was by now thoroughly used to such treatment, and he finished his meal and stood up without feeling much affected by it.

As he left the room, he saw from the corner of his eye the housemother deftly serving food to the line of students. He started to walk down the hallway, but then that classified advertisement rose up in his mind again. *Maybe this could be a little something to pass the time*, he murmured to himself, and turned back to the dining room.

“May I borrow your newspaper?”

“Sure! I’ve already read it.”

“Th-thank you very much.” Kazuya tucked the newspaper under one arm and departed the dining room.

With his back held ramrod straight, Kazuya walked through the front entrance of the dormitory and down the path that led to the main building. On the way, he spotted his teacher standing on the grass, a look of dismay on her face.

Miss Cécile was a petite woman with shoulder-length brunette hair, large round glasses, and a vaguely childlike air about her. And for some reason, she had been moping all morning.

“Good morning, Miss Cécile.”

“Oh, Kujou.” Cécile turned to Kazuya and smiled at him.

“What happened?”

“Well, it’s just that...” Cécile pointed at a stand of trees beyond the lawn, in the direction of the tall hedge that blocked the campus off from the outside world. “I was so happy to see some lovely violets in bloom over there, but it looks like someone trampled all over them yesterday. It’s such a pity. But I can’t figure it out.... Why on earth would someone be passing through that area in the first place? I mean, it’s not like there’s any walkways in that part of campus; there’s just the hedge and that’s it.”

“Hmm... Huh?” Kazuya fell silent. He remembered that that was around where he and Avril had sneaked through a hole in the hedge

after returning late yesterday, when the school gates had already closed. Which would mean that they themselves were probably the ones who had trampled on the violets...

Miss Cécile walked away gloomily, unaware of how Kazuya's face had paled in panic....

At lunchtime, Kazuya ate quickly under the bright sunshine that streamed through the stained-glass ceiling of the school cafeteria, then hastily rose from his seat. Avril, who was busy tearing her bread into tiny pieces, watched him leave, staring after him with curiosity in her eyes.

Kazuya was headed to the main library on the outskirts of campus.

The wind was much stronger than it had been yesterday, bearing an icy chill even though summer would soon begin.

At this time of day, there would be no one else besides Kazuya in such a hurry to leave the main building. He walked along the narrow, deserted gravel path, shivering to himself.

“...Victorique?”

Kazuya climbed the narrow wooden staircase as he did every day, calling out her name even though he knew he would receive no answer.

He climbed.

And he climbed.

When he finally arrived at the top, he expected to find Victorique sitting in the position he always found her in, surrounded by various large leather-bound books.... But today her small body was lying prone, her elbows resting on the ground and the palm of a tiny hand squishing one of her soft, round cheeks. Her other hand was holding her customary ceramic pipe, holding it close to her lips for a smoke.

“Look at you, sitting like that. You’ll dirty your pretty dress.”

“...Anything interesting in the newspaper?”

Kazuya’s mouth was open, about to say something, but he closed it again, wondering, *How did she know that?* as he took a seat beside Victorique. And then...

“...Ouch!”

Kazuya sat down on something round and hard. From underneath his bottom he heard a dry crunching sound, and then felt something being crushed. He jumped up in surprise. When he peeked, he saw that it was one of Victorique’s sweets that were scattered all over the floor—a macaron dusted with cocoa powder.

“There you go again, making a mess,” said Kazuya in exasperation. “Victorique, you should have something to put your sweets in instead of just leaving them on the floor. I just sat on one.”

“Ack!” Victorique looked up, her emerald-green eyes widening in horror. “My macaron!”

“...It’s all squashed now. I’ll have to throw it away.”

“You can’t. Take responsibility and eat it.”

“Huh!? But it’s been smashed into bits.”

“Kujou...” Victorique stared at him for several seconds. “Eat it.”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

Unable to resist Victorique’s piercing gaze, Kazuya reluctantly ate the shattered remnants of the macaron. As he chewed, he reseated himself next to her, and held up the newspaper that he had received from the housemother. Victorique didn’t bother to give him a moment’s glance, keeping her face buried in her book.

“It looks like Inspector de Blois hasn’t solved yesterday’s theft of the Dresden plate yet.”

“...Mmm.”

“That doesn’t surprise you?”

“There’s probably some reason behind it. But I don’t want to get too involved in the affairs of the de Blois men.”

“Hmm....”

“They all have the strangest hairstyles.”

“...Really? All of them?!”

Victorique raised her head and yawned widely. “I suppose it’s hereditary.”

“Come on, you can’t inherit that. And look at your hairstyle; it’s normal.”

“I take after my mother’s side of the family.”

“Oh?” Kazuya nodded. And then his eyes grew distant as he thought about his own family left behind in that faraway island country beyond the seas—his stern father, a military man, one who always emphasized righteous conduct, a man among men. His two older brothers were much like their father, larger than life, perhaps so large that they tended not to sweat the small stuff. Their polar opposites were their mother, a gentle and quiet woman, and sister, older than Kazuya by two years, a lovely woman just like their mother. Kazuya sometimes wondered why he resembled his father so little even though he was a boy, but out of fear of hurting his dear mother and sister’s feelings, he kept those thoughts to himself.

“...Yeah, I’m more like my mother, too.”

Victorique didn’t respond.

When Kazuya turned to look at her, she had taken her pipe out of her mouth and was stretching her limbs. Her small body elongated to a surprising degree, in the manner of a cat.

“Did you come to talk about Gréville?”

“Yeah, among other things.”

“You seem awfully fond of that pumpkin-headed brother of mine. You pay attention to his every move.”

“On the contrary! I can’t stand him!”

“...I know. I was just teasing you because I thought it might be a little amusing to make you angry. When it comes to Gréville, Kujou, your boiling point is actually quite low. I found that to be highly peculiar, so I decided to have some fun with it.”

“...Well, pardon me for that,” grumbled Kazuya, stretching out his legs that he had been hugging to his chest. Then he opened the newspaper to the classifieds and held it up in front of Victorique.

Victorique spared only the briefest of weary glances to the advertisement that began, “to the children of the Grey Wolves.”

And then she shot upright.

Victorique snatched the newspaper out of Kazuya’s hands, and brought it so close to her face that her eyelashes were nearly touching it. She read the advertisement over and over, her head moving from left to right, then left to right again.

“To the children of the Grey Wolves’.... ‘The midsummer festival is approaching’....”

“Sounds strange, huh? The housemother told me that people use these classifieds to search for runaways, to look for work, or sometimes even for mysterious messages that sound like something criminal afoot. And this message sounds especially mysterious. Victorique, you’re always complaining about how bored you are. So I thought I’d bring you a bit of mystery from the outside world.... What’s wrong?”

Victorique scrambled to her feet, her movements jerky like a doll whose spring had been wound up. She clearly seemed agitated, and her face, although not quite as pale as that of Inspector de Blois yesterday, was drained of color.

“...What’s wrong?”

Victorique tried to run, but bumped into Kazuya’s outstretched legs and fell over instead, hitting the floor with a ringing thud. Kazuya first saw the soles of her tiny button-up leather boots, followed by her billowing frilly white petticoats and delicately-embroidered drawers, which slowly settled back down to rest on her motionless form.

“Victorique?”

Several moments of silence elapsed.

Then Victorique sat back up.

She was still being quiet, prompting Kazuya to look closely into her face and ask, “Are you all right?”

Victorique spread her dainty hands and pressed them against her face. “It hurts.”

“...I guessed as much. You hit the ground awfully hard there.”

“It hurts.”

“I know.”

“...It hurts, I’m telling you, it hurts!”

“Don’t get cross with me. You fell all by yourself.” For once finding himself with the upper hand over Victorique, Kazuya said this slightly cheerily, albeit not without concern. “Oh, boy. Are you all right? Come on, let’s get back up. Where were you trying to go?”

“I wanted the book that’s thirty-first from the right and seventh from the top on the right-hand bookshelves. Kujou, you get it.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a thick book, and the cover is brown leather with round tacks.”

“...Fine.” Since Victorique was still holding her face in her hands,

Kazuya resignedly walked partway down the stairs and leaned over to pluck out the book from the location she had dictated to him. The wooden staircase swayed unsteadily in time with his movements.

While Kazuya was standing on tiptoes, Victorique climbed down the stairs and abruptly planted a booted kick into his back. Although she had kicked him at full force, it amounted only to being pushed slightly by a child. But in his precarious position, he lost his balance and nearly tumbled off the staircase, ending up falling head over heels onto the stairs. “Wh-what the hell was that for?!”

“Heh. Looks like you better watch out, too.”

“That was no accident!”

The atmosphere was threatening to turn explosive at any minute, but they returned to the conservatory, where Victorique sat back down and placed the book in front of her. While flipping through the pages with a practiced hand, she tossed a macaron into her mouth and threw the wrapper to the side. Kazuya quickly picked it up and put it in his pocket.

“In Sauvure, the deeper you go into the mountains, there’s this one ghoulish tale you’ll hear more of than any others. I suppose you’ve heard of it, too. The story of the ‘grey wolves’.”

Kazuya nodded.

“Most of the legends are made up, but this one is based on a credible account. A sixteenth century English traveler wrote about it in his diary. You know, I’ve always wondered about his description.”

Victorique held the book up to Kazuya. He took a hesitant peek, thinking to himself that if it was in Latin or Greek, he would be done for; fortunately, it was in English. Taking great pains to decipher the archaic language, he somehow managed to haltingly read the passage.

...In the yere 1511, I wandred astraye in the mountaynes on the bordoure bytwene Sauuure and Schwytzerland. Withoute a guide, and my compas spinnyng wildely, I romed lost in the dark forest. When nyghte fell, I made a fyre, aferd of the presence of beestes. I knewe that wilde beestes feard fyre. And when it cam close to midnyghte, hee appeared.

He was a yonge Wolf with siluer-grey furre. He was not like other beestes, and did not feare fyre. Treading ouer fallen leeuës, he slowly approached me.

When I thoughte my dethe was certayne, a startling thyng happend.

The Wolf opened his mouthe. I saw his scarlet tung streke throu his mouthe. But he woulde not deuour me.

For he in stede beganne to speake.

The Grey Wolf was calme, with wisdom and tranquillite farre beyonde his youthe. As he dwelled depe in the mountaynes, he surely had fewe compaynions with whome to talke. He asked me questyons, and I answerd them. Aboute profounde Misteries of the world, and the historye of men and beestes. Soone cam the dawninge of the daye, and therwith he guyded me oute of the woode.

At my departyng, I made a promyse with the Grey Wolf.

That I woulde neuer telle another soule that I had mete a Wolf who coude speake the language of Men.

But I coude not kepe this promyse. After I retorned home, I coude endure my silence no more, and I told my wyfe, and she told her brother. And thenne an official cam to knowe the story, wherfore he called vpon me to aske what had happend. And he made me promyse the same.

That I woulde neuer telle another soule...

One yere passed.

I retorned ageyne to those mountaynes.

When I cam backe to the place where I had mete the Grey Wolf, nere by

*I found a smal village. A yere ago it had been too darke for me to see.
But now I fonde no body there. It was bernned to the grounde, and was
now a hepe of desolate asshes.*

I remembryd the faces of the officials.

The faute may be myne. I, who had broken the promyse...

I called out for the yonge Wolf.

No answer cam.

But thenne I herd the sound of drye leaues.

*I turned aboute, and saw a shadowe vanisshe depe into the woode. From
bytwene the trees I had a glimse of siluery grey.*

*Thenne cam a Howlyng from on far, and I threwe myself down the hille.
I herd the Houle of many Wolues. I descended the mountayne, almost
fallyng down it. Sodainely, I felt aferd, for I knewe my owne sinne. But
as I ranne, there was only one thought in my mynde.*

They were aliue. They had escaped.

And they stille dwelled in the mountaynes, euen now....

At last, Kazuya made it all the way to the end of the English-language passage, then sighed with relief and told Victorique that he was done. She gave a start.

“You mean you were reading this whole time?”

“...Well, excuse me for not being able to read as fast as you can.”

“Really, you leave me in constant awe at your singular talent for being a half-wit. I was under the impression that you had fallen asleep with your eyes open.”

“Ugh... I just can’t win....”

Sparing no attention whatsoever to Kazuya’s frowning and

groaning, Victorique picked up the book and began rapidly turning the pages.

“This country is known for its many legends about wolves. These aren’t your typical bloodthirsty tales of man-eating wolves, or werewolves who hunt people down on full moons. ‘The silent grey wolves.’ ‘The fur-clad philosophers.’ There are various theories about these stories. I am of the opinion that if you take a broad view and consider this country in its context, a lot of things become clear. The issue is that these wolf legends only came to exist surprisingly recently, on the order of the past few centuries. For example, if you read books from the thirteenth century, you won’t find mention of wolves at all. What this tells me is that...”

As Victorique continued her monologue, Kazuya gazed absentmindedly at her. He didn’t quite understand what she was talking about, and he was falling steadily into boredom.

Now that I think of it... He suddenly remembered how she kept repeating that her head was hurting after her perfectly executed faceplant. *Maybe Victorique has a low tolerance for pain. Well, obviously, nobody likes pain, but still, the way she made such a fuss about it, you’d think the world was ending.*

When Kazuya thought back to that moment when he finally had the upper hand over her for a change, he couldn’t resist smirking.

Victorique noticed his expression. “...What happened? There’s a rather grotesque look on your face.”

“Victorique, come here for a second.”

“Mm?”

When Victorique turned to face him, Kazuya playfully gave a light flick to her pale forehead, like porcelain bestowed with an intelligent soul.

Of course, he didn’t want to hurt her, so he was careful to make it no more than a slight, barely audible tap. But as Victorique stared up at a giggling Kazuya, her emerald-green eyes instantly welled up

with tears.

“Ha-ha-ha, did I startle y—V-Victorique!?”

“I-it hurts.”

“It can’t hurt that bad; I just did it lightly. You’re exaggerating.”

“It hurts.”

“Wh-what are you talking about, Victorique?”

Victorique backed away from him, shielding her forehead with both of her tiny hands. Her face wore a fearful expression of utter disbelief, like a spoiled kitten that had suddenly been kicked by its owner.

“You’re really overreacting here!”

“Kujou, I didn’t know you were that kind of man.”

“What?! F-fine. I’m sorry. I apologize. Did it hurt that much? Still, though... Whoa, I’m sorry!”

“I never want to speak to you again for the rest of my life. I’m through with you!”

“You can’t be serious!?”

At first, Kazuya chuckled at Victorique’s over-dramatic proclamation. But afterward, no matter how many times he tried speaking to her, she would offer no response. When he realized that she was completely ignoring him as if he didn’t even exist, he felt sad, but his feelings soon turned to indignation.

Her attitude is exactly like Inspector de Blois’ when he ignores her. I get it now. If there’s something they don’t like about someone, then both of these siblings end up treating that person like he’s invisible. But still...

Discouraged, Kazuya stood up. “You’re the one being cruel, Victorique. You’re through with me? Even though I did the right thing and gave you a proper apology? You’re just being selfish. I’ve

had enough out of you.”

Victorique said nothing. She simply continued to smoke and immerse herself in her reading, as if no one else were there.

“I guess you like books better than you like me, then.”

“....”

“Fine. I won’t come here anymore.”

“....”

“This really is it. I’ll never come back to the library again. Victorique... Victorique, you crybaby!” Kazuya shouted, and ran as fast as he could down the narrow wooden staircase, still carrying the morning newspaper that he had brought with him.

He ran down.

Down...

And still had longer to go.

He nearly tripped down the stairs in his haste.

When he finally arrived at the first floor atrium, he couldn’t help one last look back at the ceiling. For a brief instant, he thought he saw a small white face look back down at him, but a second later, it skittishly drew back.

“What’s wrong with her...?” murmured Kazuya. “I’m really not coming back....”

In the distance, he heard an iron bell begin to ring, signaling the start of afternoon classes.

“I’m serious....”

Kazuya opened the massive door, letting in the warmth of the sun and the chirping of birds. He walked outside, his gaze downcast. After the heavy door slowly closed behind him, the inside of the

library would again be enveloped in an atmosphere filled with dust, mildew, knowledge, and a tranquility that no one dared disturb.

There would be nothing left but the sound of silence.

four

[4]

The grounds of St. Marguerite's School at nighttime were as deathly still as the end of the world. A ring of gardens densely forested with trees cast dark shadows on the main building and dormitories, which were themselves quiet enough as to appear empty. Sometimes the pale moon would peek out from between branches and leaves, but it was soon obscured by puffs of dark blue clouds, plunging the scene back into darkness.

At this early evening hour—which happened to be after dinner, slightly past seven o'clock—the students would normally be in their rooms, occupied with schoolwork. The upperclassmen designated as prefects would make rounds on the younger students' rooms, and the faculty member who served as housemaster was stationed at the entrance, checking the students in and out of the building.

The prefects were very much afraid of the rumors of the Grim Reaper, and they always made sure to skip Kazuya's room. But there was never any need for them to check on him in the first place, as he was always engrossed in his thick textbooks, reviewing his lessons and preparing for the next day, pouring effort into his English, French, and especially his least favorite subject, Latin.

Tonight, Kazuya was again seated at his writing desk beside the window, mumbling Latin vocabulary under his breath.

The gas lamp mounted on the wall emitted a hiss.

Textbooks and stationery sat neatly arranged on top of his sturdy writing desk.

Kazuya's face was the picture of concentration.

Then he happened to look up, and just as he was about to drop his gaze back down to his books ... a look of suspicion crossed his face, and he again looked out the window.

It was dark outside.

The curtains of Gobelins lace were thrown open to capture the moonlight, and the French windows were ajar.

Outside... Kazuya thought he sensed something being dragged down the unlit walkway below.

What's going on...?!

Feeling slightly spooked, Kazuya flung open the French window and peered outside. From his small room at the end of the second floor, he had a sweeping view, albeit a distant one, of the nearby grassy lawn, and then beyond it, the dim, winding path between the trees.

On that path ... there was *something* slowly moving.

That something was...

...an enormous suitcase.

A large suitcase, the kind a traveler would take on a journey, was moving very, very slowly, even though there was no one around to carry it. It would move only slightly, perhaps no more than ten centimeters, then stop. Several seconds later, it would move another ten centimeters.

Stopping ... and starting ... stopping ... and starting...

The bizarre sight of a suitcase fitfully sliding along a path far off into the distance, underneath the feeble moonlight in the midst of absolute silence, inflamed Kazuya's imagination.

A suitcase, moving by itself...?

It seemed to be heading in the direction of the school gates.

For a minute, Kazuya stared at it, dumbfounded.

And then he collected himself, threw aside his textbooks and pencil, and stood up.

Kazuya carefully reached for a thick tree branch that hung near the window. He wasn't particularly given to climbing trees, but when he was younger, his rambunctious, fun-loving older brothers would often laughingly abandon him in treetops or throw him into rivers. This wasn't out of any malice on their part; they had simply assumed that all boys loved climbing trees or swimming in rivers, and thus engaged in this slightly rough way of playing with their much younger brother....

With skill unwillingly honed by past experience, Kazuya deftly walked along a tree limb, then shimmied down, all the while thinking of only one thing.

A mystery from the outside world... A suitcase, moving under the moonlight!

He decided to give this story to his eccentric friend, Victorique, as a present.

Kazuya jumped from branch to branch, then reached the final two meter drop. He felt some trepidation at the height, but jumped down without pausing to hesitate.

The branch bowed, creaking loudly.

Kazuya righted himself, then crossed the lawn, making sure to carefully muffle his footsteps as he inched closer to the dark path.

The suitcase was still stopping and starting ... stopping and starting toward its destination, slowly but surely.

Kazuya's excitement was steadily building. Finding out about this mystery would give him something to offer Victorique the next time he climbed up that staircase. His heart pounded in anticipation.

He started to turn toward the back of the suitcase to take a good look at it from behind. But as his viewing angle shifted, his expression gradually stiffened in bemusement, and at last turned to dismay.

Behind the suitcase... stopping and starting in time with its jerky rhythm... he glimpsed....

A pair of tiny feet.

Those feet were wearing lace-up leather shoes. Above them, the fringed hem of an elegant dress quivered with every push. A hat adorned with velvet ribbons fluttered in the nighttime breeze.

Wasn't this in fact Victorique herself?

But then...

"...Just what do you think you're doing?" Kazuya called out to the distant path across the lawn.

Stopping ... and ...

The suitcase froze. Victorique's shoulders jumped at the sudden sound of a boy's ringing voice.

Once Kazuya received a full view of the back of the suitcase, he finally understood what was going on—that she was, inexplicably enough, sliding a huge suitcase forward with her small hands, pushing it ever so slowly.

Seeing that Victorique wasn't about give him a reply, Kazuya ran across the lawn toward the path. Upon getting closer, he saw that the suitcase was indeed quite large. If they arranged themselves carefully enough, both of them could probably fit inside of it with room to spare.

"What are you up to?" Kazuya asked again.

"Mmm...." Victorique started to say something, but instead kept her lips firmly pressed together. She turned away from him and went back to pushing the suitcase.

"Where are you going?"

"...."

"Hey, Victorique?"

"...."

“You’re not supposed to leave the school, right? You told me yourself. And the gates are locked, so you can’t open them.”

The students of St. Marguerite’s School were not permitted to leave the campus after curfew, when the gates were locked shut. In the event that a student decided to force his way out of the campus, as punishment he would be forbidden from going out on the weekends, and also risked having his parents notified of the infraction.

But in Victorique’s case...

Kazuya didn’t know the full story. Apparently, she wasn’t allowed to leave the campus at any point. The only exception was the time that Gréville de Blois applied somewhere to get special permission for her to go outside, under his supervision....

But Victorique gave no answer to Kazuya’s questions.

The trunk was slowly making its way toward the school gates at a speed of around fifteen centimeters per minute.

“Wh-why aren’t you saying anything?”

Until this moment, Victorique had been ignoring him, but now she shot a startled look at him over her shoulder. Shock and disbelief were written all over her face.

Kazuya was taken aback. “Wh-what?”

Her expression only intensified.

“You can’t talk? Oh, I know. You must have a toothache.”

Frustration filled Victorique’s eyes.

“I just noticed how swollen your cheek is. The right one... oh, the left one, too.”

The crease between her brows and the gnashing of her teeth seemed to quietly shout: *They’re always like that!*

But Kazuya took no notice of this. “Are you going to the dentist? You don’t need such a big suitcase to do that. Let me open it up. Whoa, what the heck is this? You have clothes, a huge mirror, a chair?! A tea set for ten, a vase big enough for you to hide inside, and then, what’s this... a cot?! Where on earth do you think you’re going? Are you a family trying to immigrate to the New World? You have even more luggage here than last time. Gosh, you really are hopeless!”

Grumbling to himself, Kazuya began to take the liberty of removing items from the suitcase. Victorique protested soundlessly beside him, stamping her feet and waving her hands.

As Kazuya took more and more things out, he admonished her, “If you have a toothache, you’d better wait there quietly.”

Victorique pressed both hands to her round cheeks, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Okay? After you visit the dentist, we’re coming straight back. And be sure to keep this passageway an absolute secret, or else you’ll make problems for Avril... I mean, the student who made it.”

A few moments later.

Kazuya had taken a mini-suitcase out of the much larger one and filled it with a smaller quantity of luggage. This he carried in one hand, while his other held onto Victorique, who was struggling violently, trying to disengage herself as they crept through the hole in the hedge that Avril had shown to Kazuya.

After hiding Victorique’s excess luggage among the trees, he had gone back to his room to get his wallet and coat, then returned to guide her through the secret passageway.

Kazuya turned to Victorique, who was looking profoundly unhappy. “Oh, no. I forgot!”

Victorique’s face assumed a look of expectation; surely now he had finally remembered what she wanted him to remember. But Kazuya

instead proceeded to point at her feet, clad in their tiny lace-up leather shoes. Right next to them, violet buds trembled silently, glistening in evening dew.

“Try not to step on the flowers, or you’ll upset Miss Cécile.”

“...!”

Victorique’s shoulders slumped.

Once they had left the campus, Kazuya tightly gripped her small hand so that she wouldn’t wander off on her own. The heaviness of her suitcase made it harder to hold on than he had expected. But regardless of Victorique’s keen intellect and acid tongue, she actually had very little experience going outside the school, and if he let go of her, he couldn’t imagine where she might end up. She could get lost, and end up crying on the side of the road, unable to navigate public transportation, or even fall into an abandoned well or animal trap, and be unable to get herself out.

With all of these dangerous possibilities swirling around in his head, Kazuya’s face turned pale. He squeezed his grip on her hand even more strongly.

As if in rejection of those feelings of his, Victorique savagely yanked his hand up and down and side to side, trying to free herself.

“Ow, ow, ow. Victorique, you’re going to dislocate my shoulder!”

“....”

“Where’s the dentist? Victorique?”

She began walking silently.

Kazuya had no choice but to follow her lead.

At last, Victorique arrived at a place that she had already visited with Kazuya once before—the train station, the only one in the village. A clock gleamed in the center of the small, triangle-shaped roof, displaying the time: half past seven.

Kazuya was flabbergasted. “The station?! Don’t tell me you’re getting on a train? Where could you possibly be going? Not the dentist ... after all...?”

Victorique ignored his question, and entered the station building to buy a ticket. She wrenched herself away from Kazuya, and once both hands were freed, told the station attendant her destination in a soft voice. Kazuya anxiously tugged on her hand.

“You mustn’t. If you go too far, they’ll find out that you left the school!”

“ ... ”

“And all I brought with me is my wallet....”

“ ... ”

“Let’s go back, Victorique. What on earth’s gotten into you?”

Victorique shook him loose and walked away.

Kazuya quickly said to the attendant, “I’ll have a ticket to the same destination as that girl!”

“...Going to Horowitz, then?”

“Horowitz...?” Kazuya nodded distractedly, took his ticket, and paid the fare, then chased after Victorique. Spotting her small form halfway across the platform, he ran up to her.

“Victorique, you...”

“ ... ”

“Why?”

But she still refused to say a word.

Kazuya felt strong vibrations through the planks underneath his feet; the steam locomotive was about to pull into the platform of the small station. Stars twinkled in the night sky above.

Further down the platform, he dimly made out the form of another passenger emerging from the ticket gate.

The black steam engine arrived, huffing and puffing smoke.

The conductor jumped off, pulled a brass lever, and opened the door.

When Victorique climbed on board, Kazuya could do nothing but climb on after her, despite his bewilderment....

The conductor blew a whistle, and the door creaked shut.

Horowitz... That's the name of the village in that advertisement....

Kazuya thought of the classified ad he saw in the newspaper. If he remembered correctly, it had a mysterious message that read, "To the children of the Grey Wolf: The midsummer festival is approaching. All descendants are welcome."

And then...

It mentioned the name of a tiny village called Horowitz close to the Swiss border, and included a simple map. That village is much further into the foothills than here.... But why would Victorique want to go to a place like that...?

Kazuya gazed at her worriedly. She evaded his eyes, uttering not a single sound.

There was no sign that he remembered her reason for not speaking to him.

I remember... Victorique turned so pale for some reason when she saw that advertisement. And then there's that rumor about her that I heard from Avril: 'Victorique de Blois is a legendary Grey Wolf'.... And what about that mysterious name that Inspector de Blois shouted: "Cordelia Gallo".... There are so many things I don't understand. And Victorique won't say a word, he thought to himself. Jeez, I'm at my wits' end here....

As for Victorique, she was sitting on one side of the booth, a small puff of lace and frills occupying two seats at once. She was completely motionless, like a doll that had been placed there for decoration, displaying no signs of life save for the periodic blinking of her emerald-green eyes. Her expression was morose, far less energetic than her usual self. But her round cheeks were the same as ever, warm and rosy as if she had painted herself with rouge.

“Oh, is someone in here?”

The door suddenly opened, and the face of a young woman peeked into the booth where Kazuya and Victorique were sitting. Kazuya jumped up, startled.

She was presumably the other passenger who had entered the platform earlier.

“Sure is empty this time of night. I’m feeling kinda lonely. Can I sit here with you, dearie?” Her voice was sweet like lilac perfume, but also somehow throaty and coquettish.

Kazuya thought he remembered that voice from somewhere.

“Please do,” he said, looking up at her.

She looked back at him, and raised her eyebrows in recognition.

“Oh. It’s you.”

“Yes, well...”

Standing there—

Melancholy blue-grey eyes, like a parched desert sky, shrouded by a heavy nun’s habit.

It was the young nun who had stolen the Dresden plate at the bazaar.

monologue one

Every night — I remember blood.

Oh, it may have happened long ago, but every night, I can still remember the bright color, the sound, the sensation.

That beautifully ornamented brass dagger, and the dull sound it made as it sank to the hilt.

And the setting sun burning like a flame outside the frosted glass window.

That moment when the thick blue velvet curtains fluttered, hit by a gust of wind... how dry was the sound.

The way he tumbled to the floor without a single cry, and the tip of the blade jutting out of his chest, glistening reddish brown. The faint sound of air leaking out from his throat, and then a silence that felt like death, a stillness impossible to defile. How I just stood there, even after the sunshine outside of window had been completely swallowed up by darkness. And after I came to, and returned to the place I was before, I slowly savored the pleasure all by myself.

And that voice. That lovely voice.

Why, I've never seen something so pretty in my life!

All these things, as if they had only occurred yesterday.

I can never forget them.

Maybe I'm trapped in their spell.

People call us "grey wolves," but they're wrong.

Wolves don't kill their own kind. Not for a reason like that.

one

chapter two — the squirrel in the hatbox

[1]

Soon enough, they came to a stop at another station and changed trains to a mountain railway that led deep into the Alps. This railway was built on the [Abt system](#), which enabled trains to climb steep mountain grades with the help of cogwheels that ran on toothed rails. This time, the interior was very starkly furnished, and no longer sported the elegant windows or silk curtains of the previous train. The lighting was dim, and the temperature felt slightly cooler.

Shuddering from side to side, the train slowly started into motion with a loud clang. The metallic squeals of the cogwheels grinding against the toothed rails vibrated through the floor.

A pallid glow akin to moonlight swathed the interior of the train. Victorique sat quietly next to Kazuya, her normally rosy pink cheeks now tinged in faint blue. Pale blue glass encased the lanterns hanging from the wall, emanating a weak moon-like gleam that flickered upon the two people below.

“Oh, my. Is this another coincidence?”

The flimsy door to their compartment swung open, and a young woman walked inside—the same nun who had accompanied them on the previous train.

Kazuya wasn’t expecting this. “Huh? Um, you’re taking this train, too...?”

“Yes. Really now, where are you two going?”

That’s what I’d like to know, Kazuya said to himself, and glanced at Victorique.

She maintained her stubborn silence, avoiding his gaze. When Kazuya tried to relieve his confusion by asking her questions, her irritation only seemed to grow. Up until now, he was under the assumption that she had a toothache, but that was apparently not the case. Her cheeks had looked swollen, but it occurred to him that perhaps they had always been that plump, and the thought caused him to sink even deeper into a morass of confusion.

As the nun plunked down in the seat before them, Kazuya gave her a troubled look. Ever since the ride on the previous train, he had been itching with the desire to tell Victorique about this nun. Since there was no way he could do that right in front of her, he had hoped to broach the subject once they switched to the mountain railway, but little did he know that they would be riding the same train again....

Left with no other option, Kazuya tried to communicate with Victorique using gestures, trying to convey to her that this was the same nun whom she had identified as the suspect in the theft of the Dresden plate.

For some reason, Inspector de Blois had been unable to arrest the culprit, and the case was still unsolved....

When the music box fell apart to the surprise of onlookers, the nun distracted the crowd by releasing a dove into the air from beneath her skirts, and then loudly proclaimed that the plate had gone missing.... Kazuya tried to pantomime this chain of events to Victorique. But she ignored him and turned away, pressing herself against the window like a child, even though it was pitch black outside and there was nothing to see.

Kazuya dejectedly let his hands fall.

And then his eyes wandered over to the nun who sat in front of him.

The light of the lantern, as pale as moonlight, undulated to and fro in time with the movement of the train. In the daytime, the nun's narrowed blue-grey eyes had looked like those of any healthy, cheerful young woman, but now they were unfathomable, eerie in

their lack of expression. Her eyelashes cast oddly long shadows against her pale, freckled cheeks.

Whenever the lantern flickered, her pallid face would light up, then fall dark again. As Kazuya gazed at her, he felt a sense of unease.

The nun suddenly began to speak. Her voice was upbeat, the polar opposite of her unsettling air. "So, where you two headed? There's only mountains from here on out."

"...Yeah."

"And it's the middle of the night."

"Where might you be headed, sister?"

The nun closed her mouth, and fixed Kazuya with a hard glare. "... What about you?"

"Um, we're going to Horowitz...."

"Well, whaddya know. That's where I'm going. No wonder we got on the same train."

"Oh, you're going there, too? Why is that?"

"What about you?"

Each time Kazuya asked her a question, she repeated it back at him. Feeling bewildered, he went quiet, thinking to himself, then said, "Well ... it's a long story. And you?"

"I was, um ... raised there. That's why."

"Oh, really! What kind of town is Horowitz?"

For a split second, the nun's face froze in panic. She clicked her tongue, then replied, "I guess ... it's like any other town."

She chose not to elaborate on her answer.

Victorique's eyes shifted from the view outside the window to the reflection of the nun's face on the glass. She looked at her only

briefly, but the nun noticed, and she threw Victorique a flinty look. But by that time, Victorique had already turned back to looking outside, her chin resting in her hands.

The nun thought for a moment, then let her gaze fall from Victorique's small form. "...I'm Mildred. Mildred Arbogast. Who might you two be?"

"I'm Kujou. Kazuya Kujou. And this is my friend, Victorique."

"How about the girl you were with yesterday?"

The nun with the blue-grey eyes, who called herself Mildred, suddenly lowered her voice mockingly, taking Kazuya by surprise. Confused, he answered, "Yesterday? Oh, yes, the girl who came with me to the bazaar yesterday; that's Avril. She's my classmate." Thinking back to the events from the day before, he asked the nun, "Speaking of yesterday, what happened afterwards? That plate was stolen..."

"...Beats me. No one's been able to find it." Her tone was rueful, but her expression struck a jolly contrast to her words. The corners of her mouth quivered as if she could burst into hearty laughter at any moment.

"Who could have stolen it?"

"...I wonder. And how did they pull it off? It really is a mystery."

"...."

"Oh, look! We're almost there." Mildred made a show of pointing outside the window.

While they were occupied with their conversation, the train had forged its way through the mountains and was about to arrive at their next stop.

Horowitz Station.

The town in that classified ad.

two

[2]

The town had only one inn.

“Mountain climbers? We never get those. The slopes are too steep around here; nobody would want to climb even higher unless they had to.”

When they reached the inn and questioned the innkeeper, this was his answer.

The town was practically deserted; even the cobblestone road next to the inn, seemingly the largest street in town, showed few signs of life. A late-model German automobile was parked in front of the inn for some reason, but the gleaming vehicle looked very much out of place with the local scenery.

Inexplicably enough, the body of a wild bird, shot dead with an arrow, dangled upside down from the front door of the ramshackle three-story inn.

As Kazuya stared at it, a strong gust of wind blew past him. The bird's feathers stood on end from the blowing wind, rustling gruesomely. Deep red blood dripped from the arrow wound, creating a small puddle on the stone-paved entryway.

The roof creaked with the force of the wind. Along with that wind came a whiff of a strange odor, like wet fur, set wafting through the air.

“A storm's brewing. You'd better not go out tonight.”

Kazuya turned to the innkeeper. “We can't go outside?”

“Yeah. On nights like these, the wolves come out.”

“Wolves?”

“The grey wolves.”

Victorique, standing on the creaky floor in front of the reception desk, suddenly looked up. The innkeeper noticed her, and bent down to her level as if to frighten a child.

“Grey wolves have lived deep in these mountains for as long as anyone can remember. On windy nights, they come downhill and kill people. If you don’t want those darling cheeks of yours to get bitten off, little girl, then make sure to stay in your room.”

But Victorique remained thoroughly unfrightened, and the innkeeper had to bow his head in discouragement.

“There’s legends about grey wolves all over Sauvure,” said Kazuya.

“Oh, but in Horowitz, they aren’t just legends. They’re real.” The innkeeper pointed to the door. “We hang dead birds like this so the grey wolves won’t come inside, since people say that they don’t like birds. Now, I don’t know whether that’s true or not. And there are wild wolves in the forests around these parts, so we do have to be careful of those, too. But deep in these mountains is the real village of the grey wolves. We’ve been living in fear of them for the past four hundred years.”

Just as the innkeeper finished speaking, Mildred returned from inspecting her room for the night. She came down the stairs with such loudly stomping footsteps that it was difficult to believe they belonged to a woman. Kazuya thought of the time when he had met her in the flea market. She had presented a rather rustic, unrefined impression of herself back then, too....

After getting off the train in Horowitz, it seemed unlikely that Kazuya and Victorique would be able to secure accommodations by themselves, and so they ended up coming to this inn with Mildred. It could have been the effect of the nun’s habit, but the innkeeper allowed them to check in without asking too many questions.

As he carried their luggage up to the second floor, he continued speaking. “Terrifying werewolves live in that town. They’re mild-mannered by the looks of them, but you must never anger them.

They're exceedingly beautiful, and fearsomely clever, but very mysterious. You must never provoke them with petty things...."

"Um, by werewolves, do you mean ... basically, normal humans live there?"

"They're only normal on the outside."

They had reached the second floor. The wooden-paneled floor of the shadowy hallway squeaked with their every step. Scattered brown splotches discolored the white plaster walls. The dim light from the lanterns hanging on the walls flickered faintly in time with the shaking of the floor.

The travelers approached the three small rooms that had been set aside for them.

Mountains, submerged in the night, loomed outside of the windows framed by worn beaded curtains.

The innkeeper raised his voice. "They may look human on the outside, but they're not."

"...That's hard to believe."

"Think about it. The hair and skin of those people, living secretly in the mountains." He shivered fearfully. "They have flowing blond hair and white skin. Rosy cheeks, and small bodies. And they all look exactly the same. The hair and bodies of Sauvureans come in all sorts of colors and sizes. Dark brown, light brown, red hair. But those people... Oh, yes..."

The innkeeper suddenly noticed his tiniest guest, Victorique, and looked down at her. His face stiffening, he murmured, "Yes, like her... Just like her. The terrifying, silent grey wolves."

After Kazuya located his own room, he went to peek in on the neighboring room where Victorique was resting.

"Is there anything I can help you with...?" he tried asking.

But when Victorique heard him, she promptly turned her back to him without a word.

“...What’s wrong, Victorique?”

There was no answer.

“Tch...!”

At his wits’ end, Kazuya shut the door. He walked down the hallway, wondering to himself. *What could have gotten into her? That Victorique, she’s been so quiet the whole time, and she even left the school without a single word of explanation, just to come to the middle of nowhere.... If the teachers at school catch wind of this, we’ll be in deep trouble. Same goes for Inspector de Blois finding out.... And Victorique’s family will probably have something to say about this, too....*

Kazuya buried his head in his hands.

He remembered the last time Victorique left the school, thanks to the inspector securing “special permission” for her. She had acted as if it was her first time taking a train, arriving at a station, or walking on the street, and was looking around constantly, in awe of her surroundings. Kazuya couldn’t conceive of the reason why, but Victorique was forced to live out her life within the confines of the school.

He thought back to the time when they had escaped from the ship that sank in the Mediterranean Sea, recalling the stricken looks on the faces of the inspector’s two deputies, and how they had cried out, “Thank God! You’re alive!” in such profound relief.

If they found out that Victorique had left the school on her own and taken a train to such a remote location, what would happen?

Victorique, what would possess you to come to a place like this...? What does that classified ad have to do with all this...?

With his head in his hands, he continued to agonize over his thoughts.

But there was no use thinking about it now. Victorique may not have been willing to listen to him, but Kazuya felt compelled to do something, and that meant staying by her side until he could escort her safely back to campus. After all, no matter how clever she was, she still had very little experience in the outside world. He couldn't imagine what would happen to her if he left her alone.

Kazuya quietly walked down the stairs.

When he spotted the innkeeper, sipping cheap wine and reading a magazine, he timidly called out to him. "Um, excuse me...."

Once Kazuya explained about the classified ad, the innkeeper grimaced. "Heh. So the three of you came for that, too."

"Yes, well ... huh? Did others come, too?"

"Yeah. See that German motor car parked out there?"

Kazuya remembered the expensive car parked in front of the inn, and nodded.

"Three young fellows came riding along in that. They told me the same story you did. They read that classified ad, got curious, and took the trouble to come all the way out here. It seemed like one big game to them, so I gave them a warning. The village of the grey wolves isn't the type of place you visit on a whim."

"I see..."

"But they just laughed and mocked me for being superstitious." The innkeeper lowered his voice and slowly muttered under his breath, "Not my problem if they end up regretting it."

The flame of the gas lamp hissed and went out for a split second, plunging the innkeeper's craggy face into the shadows, leaving only the sound of his voice.

"Blood will be shed. The silent grey wolves won't permit them to satisfy their curiosity."

The gas lamp regained its light, and the innkeeper's entire

demeanor reversed. In a cheerful voice, he said, “They’re staying on the third floor. Since you’re going to the same place, you should have a chat with them tomorrow morning. They may be idiots, but they’re friendly enough.”

“Huh...”

“They were crowing about climbing the mountain in their car. But it’s too steep; they’d never make it. If you’re both going to the same place, then you should ask them about hiring a carriage together.”

“I see.... Also, could you tell me the name of this village?”

“...It doesn’t have one.”

When Kazuya was about to respond, the innkeeper’s face twitched. Lowering his voice, he said, “Even though it’s been there in the mountains for the past four hundred years... It’s never had a name. They didn’t name it. No one knows why. That’s why people fear them.... We’ve never felt safe around them.”

His voice was ghostly....

A sudden chill ran down Kazuya’s spine. He thanked the innkeeper and started to walk away. Then something occurred to him. “By the way, where does Mildred live? Well, I know she’s staying here with us, but....”

The innkeeper looked up at him. “What was that?”

“The nun who came with us. She was raised in this town.”

“...That’s impossible.”

“But—”

“This is a small town. Everyone remembers the children who left the nest. Especially if any of them had taken holy orders. The townspeople here are very devout.”

“....”

“You must be mistaken. We don’t know any girls like her.”

Kazuya said goodnight to the innkeeper and made his way back to his room.

As he walked down the hall to the staircase, he happened to make eye contact with Mildred, who was at that moment thundering down the stairs. She looked down at Kazuya at the other end of the staircase, then for some reason shuddered.

The pale white lantern cast its weak light on Mildred’s freckled skin and melancholy blue-grey eyes.

“...What are you wandering around for?”

“Uh, nothing.”

“Go to bed already,” Mildred said gruffly, then walked down the hallway.

Kazuya paused, staring after her. He heard her ask the innkeeper, “Can I borrow your telephone?”

“You may.”

Kazuya couldn’t guess where she was calling. He tried to strain his ears to listen in on her conversation, but then considered to himself that it was wrong to eavesdrop. With this, he turned the other direction and walked back upstairs.

Kazuya slowly walked through the second story hallway. The wooden floor made a shrill squeak each time he took a step. Although the white plaster walls were far enough apart from each other to give one more than enough room to walk between them, they were much narrower than the ceiling was tall, giving him a suffocating feeling.

As he approached his room, he felt his steps quicken.

Creak, creak, creak...

The floor creaked on and on.

Creak, creak, creak, creak...

Each footstep jolted the tarnished hanging glass lanterns evenly spaced along both sides of the hallway. Their shaking was getting more and more pronounced, and Kazuya suddenly felt the urge to take deep breaths to fight the suffocating sensation.

The narrow hallway with its high ceiling felt as if it were rocking, like a ship floating on water. Kazuya realized that thoughts of ships were bringing up unpleasant memories, and he quickly tried to banish them from his mind.

If this were a ship...

He tried to banish them, but the thoughts remained.

If this were a ship, then this movement would be a vast wave. The sign of a storm...

Kazuya hastened his pace, rushing to the door of his room. As he turned a corner, spurring himself on even faster, the sight of a large window at the end of the hallway halted him in his tracks.

Outside the window, sharply jutting mountaintops cut through the dark sky like the teeth of a saw. Beyond them shone the wan glow of the moon.

Kazuya walked toward the window and carefully opened it.

It was getting late at night, and the air was slowly turning cooler.

A cool breeze ruffled his hair.

For the second time, he could smell an unpleasant stink, like wet fur.

In the distance, something howled ... perhaps a dog.

This smell must come from the dead bird hanging at the front door.... It has to be. And nothing more.... Kazuya repeated the thought in his mind.

Suddenly, he heard a low thump come from behind him. He jumped. As he looked over his shoulder, a beam of moonlight from the window slanted down across his profile, illuminating his silhouette in pale blue.

“...Oh, it’s you, Victorique.”

The thin door to one of the rooms had opened, and Victorique’s petite form emerged into the hallway, wearing a white muslin nightgown. Underneath the billowing nightgown, layered in three tiers of puffy frills, Kazuya caught a glimpse of fluffy calf-length trousers that to his eyes resembled *monpe*, women’s work trousers of his native land. The hems were snugly bound by aqua-blue ladder lace, like ocean waves. A smooth satin bonnet sheathed half of her hair.

Victorique was rubbing her eyes with her tiny fingers. “Say, why do you suppose a squirrel would climb out of a hatbox?”

“...I’m sorry?”

“You should ask the squirrel. In squirrel language.”

“Huh?”

“By the way, where are we?”

“Wh-where...” Kazuya gently closed the window, then ran over to Victorique, who had wandered into the hallway. “Victorique? Victorique? Hey. Don’t tell me ... you’re talking in your sleep?”

Victorique vigorously rubbed her eyes with her delicate fingers. Her emerald-green eyes, always so wide open and alert, were now half-closed in drowsiness, and her eyelids were fluttering rapidly. “...I am not talking in my sleep. You are a rude man, telling a lady that she is talking in her sleep. Never mind that. Where are we?”

“An inn, in Horowitz.”

“Horowitz?”

“You’re the one who wanted to come here, Victorique.”

There was a long pause.

Victorique’s face reddened slightly.

Then she turned on her heel and started to return to her room. Kazuya hastily blocked her way.

“What?”

“No, it’s just that... Sorry to bother you when you’re sleepy, but...”

“I’m not sleepy in the least. What do you want?”

“Now that you’re finally talking again, there are some things I wanted to ask you about....”

“...Now that I’m finally talking again?”

Victorique stood in the hallway next to her door, staring mystified up at Kazuya’s serious expression. Their faces were very close to each other. Her soft breath floated up to his jaw, tickling his skin. At last, Victorique’s expression slowly shifted. Her green eyes opened wide, blinking several times, and then a look of chagrin came over her face.

“...Ack!”

“Why were you being so quiet? Did you have a toothache after all?”

“No!”

Victorique went back inside her room, fuming. Kazuya followed her, but when he reached her door, cushions, pillows, a hat, and finally shoes came flying out at him.

“Whoa! Wait, Victorique?!”

Peering inside and seeing that she was now struggling to lift a claw foot chair, he yelled, “What are you doing?! Why are you so

angry?!".

"This is a lady's room. Stay outside!"

"A l-lady's room... Well, that's true, but...?"

Victorique panted heavily, sapped of energy. Giving up on trying to lift the chair, she slumped down into it instead. The chair was made out of flimsy wood, and looked light enough for Kazuya to lift and spin around with Victorique still on it.

Filled with bewilderment, Kazuya entered the room, while making sure to politely keep the door half-open.

Victorique glared at him. "Kujou, you're the one who said I like books better than you, and you're the one who changes his mind all the time and always forgets things. A man like you is nothing more than..." she started to say, but then lapsed into silence.

A muffled rattle came from the window; the wind was getting stronger. Dark clouds had begun to gather over the mountains outside the window. The dark blue sky was heavy in anticipation of rain, erasing the twinkling stars. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Victorique?"

"...Never mind."

"I'm trying to ask you, never mind what exactly?"

"If I say never mind, then never mind."

"What are you talking about! For God's sake!" Losing his temper, Kazuya punched the wall. His fist smarted, bringing tears to his eyes, and he fell silent.

For a long time, no one said anything. Then Kazuya opened his mouth.

"...Say, Victorique. Why did you come here?"

"...."

"It's because of that ad I showed you... isn't it? You've been acting strange ever since you saw it. You even ran away from school and came all the way over here.... You're not supposed to leave the school by yourself, right? You said that yourself. You've been putting up with it all this time, but as soon you saw that ad, you suddenly took off.... What on earth is going on with you?"

"...."

"Victorique, I'm angry with you. This attitude of yours is just like Inspector de Blois ... just like your brother's. The way he ignores you is exactly the same way that you're turning your back to me right now. For you to treat me like that... Do you really hate me that much? Aren't we friends?"

"...."

"You even told me that yourself. You said you were one of my few friends...." Kazuya's voice trailed off.

Rain began falling against the outside of the window in a muted hiss. It was drizzling. White mist obscured the view of the mountains. Drops of rain tapped out a soft rhythm on the fogged-up glass as they rolled down the window and disappeared. The room felt slightly cooler.

Finally—

Victorique spoke.

"I came to prove someone's innocence."

"Huh?"

"The innocence of Cordelia Gallo."

Kazuya raised his head and looked at Victorique. She was biting her lower lip, glaring back at him with a stubborn furrow in her brow.

Kazuya glanced in the direction of the hallway, then quietly closed the door so that no one would overhear. He moved closer to Victorique. Since there was only one chair in the room, he chose the

small suitcase that she had brought with her, and carefully sat down, looking up at Victorique from below.

“...See this.”

Victorique started to move her small hands around the chest of her nightgown, trying to show something to Kazuya. She moved aside the large muslin frills, but there were more frills behind them, and even more frills behind those....

“...What are you doing?”

“Wait!”

“....”

She was still moving aside frills.

“Hello?”

“Wait, wait, wait!”

“...Come on, I’m not a dog.”

Victorique looked up distractedly at Kazuya’s words, a puzzled look on her face.

What finally emerged from her labyrinth of frills was something round, sparkling golden. Kazuya stared at it for some time, then realized that it was a gold coin. A small hole was cut in the middle, and a chain was strung through it, turning it into a pendant. It looked like a toy that a child had made, and appeared jarringly out of place when surrounded by Victorique’s luxurious clothing. It was simply a gold coin on a chain.

Victorique whispered quietly, “Cordelia gave this to me.”

“...That’s the name Inspector de Blois said when he saw you wearing that Indian hat.”

“Cordelia Gallo is my mother.” Her voice was very subdued.

She slowly turned the pendant around to show Kazuya something affixed to the other side. From his position sitting at her feet, he reached out his hand, like a knight accepting a gift from his lady.

A small photograph was attached to the back of the gold coin. A black-and-white picture—of Victorique de Blois.

Her appearance reminded Kazuya of the time she wore the Indian turban that he had given her. Her long hair flowed down her back, and her face wore a thick coat of sensual makeup. The look of her seductively reddened lips seized him with an intense feeling of unfamiliarity. The color was utterly unsuited to Victorique—it was an adult's color.

“...Is this, um ... you?”

“No.” Victorique shook her head. “That’s Cordelia Gallo. My mother.”

Kazuya gasped.

Rain began to pelt down from the night sky, striking the window without letup.

Victorique sat motionlessly in the claw footed chair, biting her lower lip.

“My mother was a dancer. She used to appear on stage in exotic costumes and foreign makeup, and seems to have gotten very popular. But wherever she went, all sorts of incidents would follow. They say she was an enigmatic woman.”

Victorique’s voice was calm and even, sounding no different from her usual tone when she was on the top floor of the library, surrounded by trees and books.

Rain continued to fall against the window, bringing a slight chill to the room. Kazuya sat on the small suitcase, hugging his knees, looking up at Victorique.

“My mother eventually entered a relationship with the Marquis de Blois and gave birth to me, but after that, she disappeared. For various reasons, I was raised in isolation in a room at the top of a tower at the family estate. I was told nothing of my birth mother. But one night, she climbed the tower, and handed me this golden pendant. There was my mother, outside the window. She was my spitting image. I knew immediately who she was.”

“Outside the window?! Of a tower?!”

“Cordelia was always very agile.... extremely so...”

Kazuya was silent.

“My mother has always been watching over me.”

“...Yeah.”

“She was born in a village suspected to be the origin of the grey wolf legends that have taken root in Sauvure. The people of that village have been living deep in the mountains since the early sixteenth century, and are said to live a life wholly separated from civilization. They are small, blond-haired, and very clever, but above all, mysterious. It’s very difficult to find them in the cities. For the most part, they don’t leave their village. But the Marquis de Blois wished to incorporate their special abilities into the bloodline of his family. And when he discovered that this famous dancer may have come from this background, he made her his. However, the child she bore was not the boy he had wished for, but me. And after that, he found out the reason that she had been expelled from the village of her birth. My mother worked there as a maid, but one night, she committed a terrible crime, and was banished from the village. She was a criminal. The Marquis regretted bringing her accursed blood into his family. And I, the child he had sired, was also far from ordinary. In his fear, he imprisoned me in the tower where I grew up, giving me only books, and endless time.... My mother escaped, and at last ended up throwing herself into the conflagration of the Great War.”

Victorique paused. She took the pendant from Kazuya’s hands and tied it around her neck. The simple gold coin pendant once again

sank into the depths of her ocean of frills.

“I’ve always wanted to learn about the village where my mother was born, where the villagers exiled her.”

“Oh...”

“This chain of misfortunes all goes back to that one night. The night my mother committed an unspeakable crime. If not for that, then she wouldn’t have had to leave the village. And I would never have come into existence.”

“...I wouldn’t want that.”

Victorique widened her green eyes in surprise. Then she put her hands to her lips and burst into giggles.

Kazuya blushed. “Wh-what?”

“You are an amusing fellow, Kujou.”

“...Well, pardon me for that.”

Victorique smiled. Then she raised one hand and pointed at the door. “I’m going to bed. Leave at once.”

“...Hmm? F-fine. This is a lady’s room, after all.”

“I’m going to sleep. Any minute now. Come on, get moving!”

“I said fine! Jeez... Goodnight, Victorique.”

Kazuya jumped up in a hurry, about to leave the room. He had already reached the door when he thought he heard her say something from behind him, and he turned around.

Maybe it was just his imagination. Victorique’s mouth was closed. But she was staring at him intently.

“...Hmm?”

“I came to prove my mother’s innocence.”

“Y-yeah...” Kazuya returned her stare, unsure of what she was implying. The face he had grown so used to seeing now looked like the faraway image of a stranger, and it filled him with a sudden trepidation.

Victorique spoke. “This is a battle. Her battle, with the village of the grey wolves.”

“R-right...”

“So, until Cordelia Gallo wins, I’m not leaving.”

As Kazuya entered the hallway, he heard the soft sound of a door closing.

He looked up, and saw the door to Mildred’s room quivering faintly.

three

[3]

The next morning, while Kazuya and Victorique ate their breakfast of black tea, bread, and ham cold cuts in the inn's dining room, they heard the sound of several young men coming down the staircase.

A man of medium build, sporting a beard and tortoiseshell glasses, was chattering nonstop as he descended the stairs—he was clearly the talkative sort. Another man of similar height, wearing a superbly tailored jacket and a shiny gold watch, was smiling agreeably and making brief responses to show that he was listening. His voice was high-pitched and carried far.

A large, hunched man trailed behind them. He was the only one who noticed Kazuya and Victorique, and he greeted them in a soft, nearly inaudible voice while blushing slightly. He seemed to be a rather shy young man.

The men sat down and began to eat, pouring milk into their tea and tearing the bread into pieces with much gusto.

The talkative bearded man with the glasses introduced himself and the others to the two youngsters without missing a beat. He said that the three of them were students at a university of fine arts in Sauvure, studying painting. They liked to travel in their spare time, and had formed a party to tour the countryside, performing sketches along the way.

“All thanks to this guy and his rich family. You saw that car outside, right? Derek's parents bought it for him.” He gave the man with the watch and the expensive jacket a slap on the shoulder, causing him to squeak shrilly in response. His name was apparently Derek. He was the same height as the bearded man, but he had a smooth, feminine-looking face. The garrulous bearded man was named Alain. The last one, the tallest of their group, answered in a sheepish whisper that his name was Raoul. He must have been

easily embarrassed, for simply giving his own name caused him to once again turn a bit red in the face.

Alain began gleefully boasting about how they were going to take their state-of-the-art German automobile up to the village of the Grey Wolves, and extolling the praises of Derek's parents for buying the car for him. It seemed that the three of them were relying on Derek's wallet for their travel expenses, and hence puffed him up as much as possible, but Alain the chatterbox was evidently the boss of the group. Raoul smiled and kept quiet. He was so meek that he almost disappeared into the background.

At this point, the innkeeper brought another pot of tea and interjected, "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but it's impossible to take a car to the village of the Grey Wolves. These mountains are too steep for a car to do the job."

"...You're kidding!" Derek, the owner of the car, raised his high voice in protest. Alain was also taken aback, and started to argue. Raoul said nothing, but his face showed worry.

"You'll have to hire a carriage. Horses should be able to handle those slopes."

Derek nodded, seemingly defeated. But the bearded Alain continued to complain loudly. The reserved Raoul gazed at him with a troubled frown.

Then Mildred walked in the room with heavy footsteps, finally awake after sleeping in later than everyone else. She yawned widely, mumbling a bleary-eyed, "Morning..."

"Whoa!" Kazuya couldn't help exclaiming in surprise. He again smelled a strong stench of alcohol clinging to the nun. The three young men also noticed it, and they stared at Mildred as if they had never seen the likes of her before.

The innkeeper spoke unconcernedly. "These kids are going to the same place you are. So why don't you hire a carriage together? If the five of you ride in one, it'll be cheaper per person."

“...Make that six.” Mildred staggered to her seat, and held up a wobbly hand. Everyone turned to her, startled. “I’m going, too.”

“...Why?” asked Kazuya.

Mildred glared at him. “Why not? I wanna go, too. Six people. Nice to meet you all.”

The three students nodded, reeling as Mildred’s stinking breath hit them in their faces.

A clap of thunder echoed from far away. It crashed dully, like a butcher knife chopping chunks of meat on a table. Several thunderclaps roared, and then the cloudy morning sky resumed its silence.

Huge drops of rain fell, staining the clothes of the people waiting in front of the inn.

“It’s this carriage right here. The coachman is top notch.”

The innkeeper pointed at a carriage that was slowly approaching them from the road. The antiquated four-wheeled carriage, drawn by two horses, had an old man as driver, his face half-hidden by a long beard. Despite his advanced age, the outline of thick and powerful arms attached to broad shoulders was clearly visible from beneath a cloak that looked as timeworn as the carriage.

Coming closer, the old man shouted at the innkeeper, “Take a car, you say? Absurd. Even with a carriage, you need experience getting there or you’re not getting there at all.”

The old man went on to say that the people from the nameless village had told him to bring any visitors who had arrived on account of the advertisement up to the village in his carriage. But the fare he quoted was much higher than market price. Kazuya started to object, saying that it was far too much, but Derek, the son of rich parents, pulled out his bulky wallet and immediately paid the full price.

The coachman did a double-take when he saw the wallet, and a look of dismay clouded his face, perhaps in regret that he hadn't asked for an even higher price. Kazuya tried to speak, but the bearded Alain stopped him.

"Don't worry about it. That much is nothing to Derek."

"...But I should at least contribute a little bit, too."

"Nah, it's fine. Don't worry about it."

Alain said this proudly, as if he had been the one to pay the fare. Kazuya's eyes met Raoul's. The quiet man shrugged, silently reiterating what Alain had said.

The six of them loaded their luggage into the carriage and climbed inside, sitting three abreast. The carriage slowly began to move.

When they at last left the cobblestone roads of the town and headed up a mountain road muddy with peat, the ride suddenly became very bumpy. They could tell that they had crossed onto a steep, slick road. The box-like carriage rocked wildly, endlessly, as if it had been seized from above by a giant and shaken from side to side.

Mildred mumbled, "I don't feel so good...."

The three men paused their jovial chatter to exchange looks of alarm. The bearded Alain spoke for the others. "Are you hungover, sister?"

Mildred shook her head, not even able to manage a reply.

Victorique reached out to crack open the wooden window.

Ran began to fall, shimmering against the outside of the window in delicate patterns.

Thickly tangled copper-colored shrubs continued down both sides of the road, so solidly entwined that the rain did nothing to shake them. A bank covered in moss and ferns soon came into view, and below that was a cliff that towered so high that looking down would make one dizzy. If the coachman made the slightest misstep

in handling the horses, they would end up falling headlong into the abyss. Further beyond that point, the summit of a hill looked down upon them, veiled in mist.

The carriage approached a narrow, dilapidated stone bridge, and crossed it with wheels and hooves clattering. Underneath the bridge was a swift, muddy stream, an icy river that flowed along the valley floor.

After crossing the river, the trees gradually began to increase in height. The plants were olive-colored, dampened and swaying in the drizzle. Dark, nearly black soil spread out below them. For how much longer would they have to climb? wondered Kazuya. As the trees grew taller, the forest became even darker. Now they were shrouded in pitch darkness even though it was morning, as if they had wandered into a nightmare and lost their way in a world not their own. Oak trees stood bent and twisted from years of exposure to wind and rain, forming silhouettes like an old woman's bowed back, their entwined branches bleached white.

Kazuya whispered to Victorique, "I wanted to ask you something...."

"What?"

"That nun stole the Dresden plate at the bazaar, but she still hasn't been caught. And she said that she was born in Horowitz, but the innkeeper denied it. What's going on with her...?"

"You don't have to worry about her," Victorique declared cryptically. And then she turned away, apparently bored by the topic of conversation. Kazuya reluctantly fell silent.

On and on the carriage went, for what felt like an eternity.

At last, it suddenly brightened outside.

They had passed through the forest and arrived at a strange alcove.

Hills surrounded it, like the rounded bottom of a shallow drinking glass. At the very bottom of the glass, tall fortified walls encircled a dense cluster of stone houses that made up a small town...

No...

A village.

The carriage stopped.

For some reason, the two horses started to shake their heads and whinny. The coachman hit the struggling horses with his whip, goading them onward. But the horses continued to throw their heads about, stamping lightly on the ground in their distress.

The six passengers slowly climbed out of the carriage.

There was a tall precipice between a gorge and the steep road that the carriage had just climbed. The vertical cliff formed an immense wall that kept going further and further down. When Kazuya tried to peek over the edge, the gorge was so deep that his head swam. Sunlight reflected off the craggy rocks of the cliff as if they were sharp-edged knives. At the distant bottom ran a streak of white. It was rushing turbulently, burbling loudly—a muddy stream. The powerful flow of water emitted white foam as the waves slammed against the rocks, shooting cold sprays of water into the air.

Kazuya turned away from the scene below the cliff, and looked up at the village of grey stone.

At that moment, the sky cleared, and the sun shone brightly again, casting its shine upon a moss-covered stone tower and square houses.

The six of them squinted their eyes against the light.

The three young men let out raucous, almost exaggerated whoops of joy.

“Just like I imagined it!”

“This is uncharted territory. Incredible!”

The coachman heard them, and grimaced.

Kazuya looked down at Victorique’s face as she stood next to him.

She was staring up at the stone-grey village, her face completely expressionless.

Beneath the cliff, they saw stone gateposts and an enormous iron door. It looked large and forbidding, existing to defend against any intrusion from the outside world. An impregnable high wall stretched around it. The sight was like a medieval walled city that had been transported to the present day.

The weathered wooden drawbridge rose up. It consisted of a crude wooden plank whose color had faded from years of use. Wide enough to admit one carriage, several thick ropes were strung along the sides to use as railing.

The ominous crest of the Grey Wolves loomed darkly on the iron gate.

“...This is where I take my leave,” the coachman said, preparing to depart quickly. “They said that the midsummer festival starts tomorrow morning and ends in the evening. I’ll come back here to pick you up when it’s time.”

The horses again whinnied hoarsely, their hooves stamping impatiently against the ground.

When Kazuya turned to look at the carriage, he heard a loud clanging from behind. He turned back just in time to see the ancient drawbridge slowly began to descend toward him.

And at the same time, the heavy iron door was also beginning to move, ever so slowly....

monologue two

We ascended a rugged mountain.

The road was steep, and the carriage so swung wildly from side to side that it startled me. Light rain continued to fall. Hardly anyone spoke inside the carriage; the only sound came from the turning of the wheels.

That tiny girl opened the window.

Her companion, an Oriental boy—Kazuya Kujou—stared at her profile, worry in his eyes.

Watching the way he reacted to her slightest movement brought a smile to my face. And yet they also seemed to argue at the drop of a hat. An adult would immediately be able to tell how close they were, but these children probably didn't realize it themselves.

The carriage swayed.

Outside the window, I could see nothing but a line of trees, their tangled branches parched white. I felt myself getting dizzy at the sight.

But I had to keep going.

I had no choice but to go to that village.

My eyes drifted over to the girl's face.

Her green eyes were as clear as the tropical seas, so unlike this dark forest at the mercy of the elements.

I glanced at the boy's face.

His jet black eyes stared straight at the girl. He seemed kind, but I could sense stubbornness in the set of his jaw.

They didn't know.

The true aims of their fellow passengers.

They knew nothing at all!

one

chapter three — Cordelia's daughter

[1]

It was like they had gone back in time and arrived in a medieval village.

Light rain continued to fall, pouring thick, milky white fog on the village in the narrow basin, which was ringed by foothills that jutted out at right angles like the teeth of a saw. That fog enshrouded the entire valley floor like an opaque curtain of air.

The travelers made their way very slowly through the fog and into the nameless village, as if pulling aside a heavy, cream-colored curtain that hung at the entrance of a room.

The bridge was very old, and creaked unpleasantly as they walked across. At the bottom of the ravine far below, rapids gushed violently, hurling white foam at the cliff face. An ominous wind was whistling. The six of them began to quicken their pace without quite knowing why, trying to clear the drawbridge as fast as they could.

As soon as they had crossed over, the drawbridge groaningly rose back up. Inside the gate was a stone arch, and above it was a structure that looked like a watchtower. It took several men to pull up the drawbridge. Their long blond hair, tied to the back, swung from side to side with each movement of their arms. Kazuya started to call out to them, but then a strong gust of wind blew, camouflaging their bodies and the horseshoe-shaped arch in an even thicker fog.

Just as the wind-blown fog threatened to blind Kazuya, the air suddenly cleared, and he was able to see unexpectedly far into the distance. The wind's loud howling blocked his ears. Everyone except Victorique covered their ears and looked around themselves fearfully.

“Hey, look at that!” Alain pointed.

The fog was steadily lifting.

“Oh!” Kazuya exclaimed.

Before them appeared a small village filled with rows of stone, square-shaped houses. They formed a peculiar motif, like mossy grey stones that had been arranged in a geometric pattern according to some mysterious higher-order mathematics, while also appearing randomly scattered about at the same time.

An open wooden door flapped in the wind, hinges squeaking.

There was a large well in the center of the small plaza.

...a plaza that was completely empty.

“Are these ... ruins...?” Raoul murmured in awestruck wonder.

Derek nodded, and started to chatter in his high-pitched voice. “It’s a medieval village! Look at that church!” He pointed at a stone tower that seemed to be a church, which was starting to come into view as the fog cleared. “Take a look at those [rose windows](#), and that steeple!”

“It’s like a medieval church right out of an old painting,” Alain said, removing his hat. The three young men gazed at the church with reverent eyes, lapsing into a moment’s silence.

When Kazuya turned to him with a questioning look, Derek began to explain. “We’re attending art school, so we’ve learned a lot about this sort of thing.”

Alain whistled in delight. Mildred hung her head silently, still looking green.

The wind gusted again, and all of a sudden, the rest of the fog lifted with a hiss.

The travelers came to a stop, disoriented.

Unbeknownst to them, up ahead a group of men had gathered, carrying spears and long swords. They stared at the outsiders with expressionless faces.

“...Are those ghosts?” Alain muttered jokingly, scratching his beard.

It was an understandable response. The villagers who stood before them were dressed in what looked like historical costumes. Their appearance matched the ancient state of their village, which could have passed for ruins from the Middle Ages.

The men wore woolen blouses under leather vests, and sharply pointed hats. The women's skirts were gathered in a large hump at the back, and their hair was pulled back under lace-embroidered bonnets.

Their clothes were like costumes from a Shakespeare play, frozen in time....

And all of them looked very similar. Both men and women wore their long blond hair pinned tightly to the back. Their bodies were petite, and each one of their dainty, well-formed faces was like that of a doll that an artisan had labored over to make just right.

They looked over the travelers with their dull green eyes. Their expressions were hard, and their skin dry, which made them look like a lifeless army of ghosts in spite of their small, delicately proportioned features.

The villagers turned their attention to Victorique.

A stir of voices spread through them.

“...It's Cordelia's daughter!”

“Cordelia...?”

“Look at that face. She's the spitting image!”

“It's a bad omen!”

Their voices were hoarse, like dry, crackling leaves falling to the

ground. In a single synchronized movement, the villagers raised their weapons, and the dull clash of metal against metal echoed through the square.

But then...

A wizened voice rang out from nowhere.

“Wait.”

The villagers lowered their weapons. A path spontaneously formed in the middle of the crowd, and then at last an old man stepped forward.

The man, wearing a battered frock coat, appeared to be in his sixties. His salt-and-pepper hair was more salt than pepper, and extended down his back, tightly bound. His forelocks and beard hung low, and his eyes were half-hooded by loose, wrinkled skin. A large, leathery hand gripped a smooth ebony staff.

The man walked up to Victorique and stood still, clasping his hands together like the statue of a saint. His quiet eyes were filled with a cold, clouded light. He looked down at Victorique.

“...You are Cordelia’s daughter. What is your name?”

“Victorique de Blois,” Victorique answered, her voice low, almost as low as his voice, and husky like an old woman’s.

The man gasped softly. “De Blois...? Then, you are mixed with the blood of this nation’s aristocracy....”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“No... Your mother... What happened to Cordelia?”

“She disappeared.”

“I see. There is no peace for the wicked.”

Victorique bit down on her lip. “Cordelia is not a criminal.”

“...It is foolish to talk back to your elders. As you were not raised in this village, you have not learnt the humility that a child ought to possess. Even Cordelia never went against my words, and left this place without complaint. ...Well, let it be.”

Taking no notice of the rage burning in Victorique's eyes, the man turned to the villagers.

“The descendant who came after reading our message is this child. Cordelia's daughter. But this girl bears no sin. There is no need to drive her away. Let us welcome her to celebrate our midsummer festival together.”

The villagers were silent. They exchanged quiet looks with their clouded eyes, but no one said a word.

The man continued. “You must do as I say. Worry not; no calamities shall befall us. Even if this girl's mother, Cordelia...”

The wind blew, stirring the man's silvery hair.

“...is a murderer.”

The man was the village headman, and his name was Sergius. He told them that the village had stood in this location for four hundred years, cutting off all contact with the outside world and living as self-sufficient a lifestyle as possible.

Sergius walked them through the village, acting as their guide.

“The midsummer festival is the time when we welcome the summertime return of our ancestors' spirits, and pray for a good harvest. It starts tomorrow morning when the sun rises, and ends at dusk. I hope you will stay through tomorrow evening.”

“Tomorrow evening...” murmured Victorique.

“Yes. A little more than one day. At daybreak, floats will parade through the town square, accompanied by music; this will signify to the forest that the festival has begun. After that will be a short

break, and before noon, the festival will begin anew. Young girls will throw hazelnuts to announce the start of the festival. Then, the young men will don costumes to perform a play in the town square. The Summer Army and the Winter Army do battle, and Summer claims victory, defeating the general of the Winter Army, the Winter Man. We celebrate the victory of summer, then make preparations to welcome the ancestors. It is said that the ancestors pass through the church on their way to the square; therefore, during that time only, no one is allowed into the church. And when night falls, villagers will be chosen to put on masks and perform a dance in the role of the returned ancestors. With this, the festival is complete, and we are ensured one more year of peace and prosperity!” continued Sergius.

But Kazuya was agitated, his shock at hearing the word “murderer” just minutes ago still unabated. In contrast, the three young men were in their own world, whooping and hollering over the sights of the village.

“Look at that well!”

“Stone houses and hearths. And the chimneys, too! Everything’s so damn old!”

Alain began to boast about his shiny, newfangled wristwatch to the young blond man who stood at Sergius’ side, presumably his assistant. The young man, who held a shotgun in one hand, was one of the taller villagers, and even more beautiful than the rest. He glanced briefly at the watch, then began to stare at it in astonishment.

“What, you’ve never seen one?”

“...We never leave the village.”

“Really? Then what do you do all day?”

Alain started talking noisily to the young man, who was close to his own age. After the watch, he next showed off his tortoiseshell glasses, then tugged on Derek’s clothing as he walked next to him and showed off the tailoring....

The headman, Sergius, frowned in disapproval, his long eyebrows twitching.

He guided them to the square in the center of town. Beyond the square, they could see a steep cliff and a small, dark forest. Apparently, the village was shaped like a small circle surrounded by forest on all sides. Only the cliff area around the entrance was enclosed by the fortified walls; there were no walls at the back of the village. But the forest was filled with bluffs, and seemed to be a treacherous place to navigate.

The village was not very large. But Kazuya felt surprised at the fact that such a small village had been able to preserve their way of life for such a long time.

Now Sergius directed his gaze toward the forest.

Tree branches were rustling softly in the wind.

The next moment, Sergius snatched the shotgun from his young assistant and lifted it up, aiming the barrel at the woods.

Alain and Derek were in the middle of a lively conversation and didn't notice what he was doing.

The young assistant gasped.

The sharp sound of a gunshot rang out.

Alain and his travel companions all jumped at once, turning startled faces to each other. "Wh-wha-what the hell?"

"...Wolves," Sergius said curtly. "Wolves roam wild in these mountains. They grow large, and are extremely fierce. When we find one, we prevent it from coming near the village by scaring it off. As I just did."

The young men exchanged looks.

"There are many cliffs hidden in the forest, as well as ferocious wolves, so you mustn't go near it. The only safe way to enter the village is by crossing the drawbridge."

Sergius' young assistant drew his lips into a taut line of fear, but said nothing.

Alain ran his fingers through his beard, and asked Sergius, "But old man, down in Horowitz, they were calling the people who live in this village grey wolves. Basically, they're pretty suspicious of you people, ya know?" He turned to Raoul, looking for agreement. Raoul nodded, his large body cowering as he stared at the shotgun from the corner of his eye, frightened.

When the young assistant heard the headman being addressed so rudely as "old man", he gasped, and hesitantly looked from Alain's face to Sergius, not sure if he should get angry.

Sergius laughed dryly. "That isn't true! We are ordinary humans. They simply distrust us because we live deep in the mountains and still hold on to our old ways of life."

"Huh..." Alain nodded, and Derek laughed shrilly. Raoul joined in with a grin of his own.

"...We simply happen to be of a slightly different race. Lowland people—they probably sense our racial difference from our skin color. Because from our perspective, there's nothing in particular that we've ever done," added Sergius cryptically. And then he began to walk again.

They continued down the dusty cobblestone street. As they passed through the square in the center of town, they gazed at the medieval architecture of the church on the side of the road. Behind the church, they could just barely make out the sight of a graveyard through the fog. Somehow, this gave Kazuya a bad premonition, and he looked away. Beyond the graveyard, the dark forest grew toward them, the spaces between the tree branches filled with thick fog.

The narrow road suddenly widened. Just when it seemed like they would soon be in the woods, Sergius halted.

The broad cobblestone road continued to gently incline upward. Countless layers of mist shrouded the way like gauzy organdy

curtains fluttering in the wind. The layers of mist danced, flying higher and higher. Then, further up the road, they spied something huge on the ominously darkened hill slightly above them—a rounded lump, like something squatting with its back arched.

It was grey, and larger than anything they could have imagined. Mildred choked back a scream.

It was an enormous grey animal!

For now, it was crouched on the dark, gloomy hill, but it seemed to be sluggishly stirring to life, about to lift its head in the travelers' direction and demolish the hill with a kick of its hind legs, in preparation for imminent attack....

The figure of an enormous grey wolf—

Suddenly, in the back of Kazuya's mind, he remembered the eerie rumor that the innkeeper had told him in Horowitz, and that grim, anxious look he wore on his face.

Grey wolves live there....

You must never anger them....

You must make sure never to annoy them with petty things....

Terrifying werewolves....

A gust of wind whistled past.

...*Huh?* Kazuya rubbed his eyes.

He realized that the huge figure was in fact made of stone. A lifeless substance: cold, dry, grey. And then he realized that this too was a trick of the eye.

For it was a manor, large and dark grey.

Stone slabs formed its body, with a tall tower on the left side that resembled an animal's raised head. Floral rosettes were elegantly carved into the pillars at the entrance, and the roof was also beautifully ornamented. On a clear day, the stone façade would probably gleam like white chalk, but for now it was submerged in a deep, forbidding grey.

It was a peculiar manor—elegant, but in such a bleak color, as if it had been painted all over with a brush dipped only in black ink.

Around the perimeter, narrow flower beds were arranged in a strange pattern, planted with red flowers that Kazuya didn't recognize. They provided the only source of bright color, but the flower beds looked more like writhing red blood vessels, contributing to the dark and foreboding atmosphere.

Sergius announced gruffly, "This is my home."

The travelers looked at one another.

"You may stay here until the festival ends," he continued.

The manor was large and dimly lit.

It was beautifully constructed. Every room had polished mahogany furniture and was shielded by velvet curtains, giving the manor an impression quite separate from that of the rustic stone village.

When they came in through the large entrance, they saw a grand staircase lined with red carpet, and further in, a hall sparkling with chandeliers. They climbed the staircase up to a long corridor lined with heavy curtains. The wall lamps near the ceiling flickered orange.

Portraits of ancestors were hung on the walls of the dim corridor. All of the faces were attractive, and yet stern, and they wore their blond hair long and tied back. The portrait closest to the staircase looked the youngest, seeming to be just past forty.

As the visitors looked up at the portraits, an innocent, childish-sounding voice rang out from the shadows.

"That is Master Théodore, the headman who was murdered."

Victorique's shoulders jumped.

Everyone turned in the direction of the voice.

A woman stood there, holding a lamp. She looked around twenty-five or twenty-six years old. Her thick blond hair was plaited into small braids, which were wound one by one into an elaborate hairstyle. She had a comely, fine-featured face, but her expression was flat, like a broken doll. Her head leaned stiffly to one side, looking as if it would twist off and roll onto the floor any second.

Her dull green eyes, the color of jade, glittered brightly in the dim light of the corridor.

Judging by her attire, she was apparently a maid. She wore clothes in the same archaic style that Sergius did. Her skirt was long, and gathered into a large bustle on the back. A corset was fastened at her slender waist, and a white collar covered the skin at her throat.

Sergius turned to the group. "This is Harminia. She works here as a maid."

Harminia dipped one knee in a light curtsy.

And then she looked down on Victorique with cold eyes.

"You look exactly like Cordelia."

Kazuya gulped.

Her voice, which had previously sounded like a child's, now sounded like a different person altogether. This time, it was low and deep, like a man's voice.

As Harminia went on speaking, her voice rose and fell, changing on its own, sounding like a man and then a woman, an adult and then a child.

"I was very young at the time, but I remember it well. Cordelia was exiled exactly twenty years ago. In this house..."

"Harminia."

"In Master Théodore's study, Cordelia scattered gold coins on the floor, and then..."

“Harminia.”

“She took a dagger and...”

“Harminia!”

She closed her mouth and smoothly raised her left hand.

With everyone watching, she brought the index finger of her left hand up to her dull jade-colored eye, pulled down the lower eyelid, and rubbed the eyeball with the pad of her finger.

The sight of her rubbing her eye with such violent force caused the onlookers to gasp. They had a clear view of the white below her left eye. Red capillaries were springing to the surface, flooding the white with thin red cracks.

Harminia rubbed and rubbed, exposing the white of her eye.

And then she abruptly withdrew her hand.

The lamplights suddenly seemed to dim slightly.

“The incident occurred in the study. No one uses it anymore. It’s an old room at the back of the first floor.”

The guests sat around a table in the dining room, in front of a light lunch that Harminia had prepared.

In the room was a marble mantelpiece. Rectangular glass lamps hung on the polished black paneled walls, which were also decorated with several paintings. The room was lavishly decorated, and yet it felt somehow suffocating. Kazuya suddenly realized that the cause may have been the low ceiling. Both the rooms and the corridors had low ceilings, and this instilled a feeling of tension, as if they would be crushed at any moment. ...Perhaps it was because the people of this village were so short.

Harminia brought out sandwiches, black tea, and pastries, all on matching china, which looked as though they had been polished

over and over for generations. They were old, but a thorough burnishing made them gleam dully.

Sergius began to speak. “Master Théodore had secluded himself in his study since the evening. At twelve midnight, the maid, Cordelia—a girl of fifteen at the time—had the duty of refilling his water jug.”

If she was fifteen, Kazuya said to himself. Then she would be the same age as he and Victorique were now.

“At the time, I was Master Théodore’s assistant, and was inside this manor. I passed by with some other men in front of the corridor, just in time to see Cordelia about to enter the study. As usual, she was carrying a crude iron candlestick. She knocked, then tried the doorknob. It was locked, and the door wouldn’t open. That door was normally left unlocked, but during times when Master Théodore wished to avoid interruptions, he occasionally locked it. Cordelia pulled out the key and opened the door. By that time, my companions and I had already passed beyond the front of the corridor. I recall that the time was exactly twelve o’clock; I know this because I looked at my pocket watch. Cordelia was also a highly punctual person. But for some reason, the men whom I was with gave differing testimony about the time, and so at present, I cannot be absolutely sure when it occurred. Leaving that aside...”

As the three young men munched on their breakfast, they complained nonstop about the outmoded choice of ingredients. Whenever Alain loudly stated something, Derek replied in a high-pitched voice. Raoul stayed quiet, but he kept staring at the silverware and tapping it against the table as if there was something unusual about it. None of them seemed to have much interest in Sergius’ story, and paid little attention.

Mildred was silent, her face green as if she still had a hangover. All she could do was pick at her meal.

Victorique listened carefully to what Sergius had to say.

“...Cordelia screamed and fled from the study. The rest of us were startled and ran to see what had happened. We restrained Cordelia,

who was hysterical from fright, and went in the room... It was pitch dark inside. We lit up the floor with a candlestick, and saw Master Théodore lying face-down on the floor. He was already dead. A dagger was stuck in his upper back, and the blood-stained tip came all the way out through his chest. And for some reason..."

Sergius paused, then said in a genuinely mystified tone, "There were gold coins scattered all over the floor."

"...Gold coins?"

"Yes. Around twenty of them. But as we don't use any such coins in our village, I can only assume that Master Théodore was collecting them. The coins were soaked red in his blood."

"...."

"Later that night, Cordelia fell ill with a high fever. In her sleep, she kept murmuring, 'round things, so many round things, so pretty'. I suppose that she was referring to the gold coins. Meanwhile, the rest of us discussed the situation. And ten days later, after we waited for Cordelia's fever to break and for her to wake up, we ... no, I, in my capacity as the new headman, decided to expel her from the village."

"Expel her...?" asked Kazuya.

"Correct. We sent her away with one suitcase and one gold coin, and raised the drawbridge after her. We never even knew if she made it down the mountain safely after that. Ferocious wolves, steep cliffs, and rapids... It seemed unlikely that this girl, who had never stepped foot outside of the village, would be able to reach the town at the base of the mountain alive. ...I remember it even now. That "round thing"... that gold coin in her hand, and the tears that filled her green eyes as she watched the drawbridge rise, sparing her no mercy. Cordelia was an orphan. No one had taught her how to climb down the mountain, and no one gave her winter clothing or food to take. I, the headman's assistant, was her sole guardian, and allowed this girl with no living relatives to work in the mansion as a maid. And I was the one to sentence her ... as a criminal. She was still recovering from her illness when she was sent alone down

the mountain, a journey that takes several days, and driven out to the city.... But she must have found some way to survive, for her daughter to be here with us today.”

“But why...?” asked Kazuya. “To exile her, of all things...”

“I couldn’t imagine that anyone but Cordelia could be the murderer. The study was locked from the inside. She confirmed that herself. And no one else was there. There were only two keys to that room. One of them Master Théodore carried on his person, and the other was in Cordelia’s hands the whole time. And she said that when she entered the study, the candlestick in her hands allowed her to see the entire room. There was no one there but Master Théodore and herself. Cordelia said that he was already dead by the time she entered the room, but her story made no sense. I surmised that something must have happened after she entered the study. And Cordelia ended up killing Master Théodore. That would make the fever she subsequently suffered the fruit of a guilty conscience.”

“But just that in itself... That alone isn’t clear proof that she was guilty...”

“There is no flaw in my judgment,” said Sergius in a low voice. “And after Master Théodore died, I became the new headman. Whatever I decided was final.”

“But...”

“We cannot overlook wrongdoing. That would bring calamity upon the village. It is my duty to protect it.”

“....”

“Cordelia is a criminal. There is no other possibility,” Sergius stubbornly repeated.

Victorique, who had been listening silently, suddenly spoke. “I want to visit that room.”

Sergius shook his head. “I won’t allow it.”

“Why not?”

“...Letting guests wander wherever they want only leads to trouble,” Sergius said testily, and then fell silent.

two

[2]

Each traveler had been prepared a guest bedroom near the back of the third floor. All were spacious, and had large canopy beds planted squarely in their center. A mirror was built into the wall at around chest height. Heavy, lustrous velvet curtains hung on the opposite wall.

Everyone filed into their rooms, starting with Victorique, Kazuya, Mildred, Alain, Derek, and ending with Raoul. Kazuya carried Victorique's suitcase into her room. She was being very quiet. All she did was rest her pale chin thoughtfully on her small hand, not even bothering to look at him.

Victorique put her pipe in her mouth and lit the fire. Then she stood on her tiptoes, reached out to a string hanging on the edge of the window, and pulled hard. The curtains slowly rippled open, revealing a view of a stone balcony and a dense forest of oak trees.

Victorique carefully observed the scenery below with narrowed eyes.

Kazuya paused what he was doing and walked up to her. "What's wrong?"

Between the trees, a rundown cemetery peeked out from behind the old church.

For a few moments, Victorique said nothing. Then she suddenly left the room.

Kazuya scrambled to catch up. "Where are you going?"

"On a walk."

"A walk...?"

Victorique gave him no answer. She rested a hand on the polished bronze railing, then slowly descended the marble staircase.

Harminia, who had been cleaning with a brass bucket and a white cloth, followed the small girl with her eyes, twisting her head around like a snake slithering upright.

After Victorique left the building, she slowed down to a more leisurely pace. Kazuya caught up to her and joined at her side.

They passed by several villagers on the cobblestone path. No one made any attempt to look at them. Victorique walked on past them, ignoring them.

“...Where might you be headed to?”

They suddenly heard a voice. Kazuya turned around and saw a young man standing behind him, as if he had materialized out of the fog.

The young man was instantly recognizable as one of the villagers in his medieval-looking clothes, like a costume out of a Shakespeare play. His long blond hair was carefully tied back, and his white, almost translucent skin was as smooth as a young girl's. He had the same deep green eyes that Victorique did, but there was no expression in them. It was a cold and unreadable face, like a Noh mask....

Kazuya remembered who he was. This was the young person who had been standing at Sergius' side: his assistant. The same one who was so astonished by the sight of Alain's and his companions' wristwatches, clothing, and everything else they showed him....

“Allow me to guide you. Oh, and my name is Ambrose. Pleased to meet you.”

The boy, Ambrose, introduced himself to Kazuya and Victorique. Kazuya raised his eyebrows; his impression of the young man had changed in an instant. The moment Ambrose smiled and started to speak, he began looking like a vivacious and cheerful boy. Even his cheeks turned rosy with life. His beautiful face, like the finely

carved features of a noblewoman, became warm and merry.

“We haven’t had any guests from the outside in quite a while, so, well, I’m just happy. But I’ll try not to get too carried away....”

“Are you here to welcome us?” asked Kazuya, surprised.

Ambrose looked perturbed, and was silent for a moment. “The people who live here don’t like change. They don’t think contact with people from other cultures is a positive thing. Master Sergius always says that people in the outside world lead bad lifestyles....”

“Oh...? Is that what you think, too?”

“Well, me, I don’t really....” Ambrose trailed off.

And then he began to scrutinize Kazuya’s face and body. When Kazuya started to feel uneasy from the eyes boring into him, Ambrose hesitantly reached out his hand. He looked so much like a aristocratic lady that Kazuya felt himself automatically freeze shyly. Ambrose began stroking and rubbing his face, and grabbing and pulling on his hair.

Kazuya endured it briefly, but soon he had to yell, “...I beg your pardon!”

“Oh, I was just wondering why your hair and skin color are so different. I do know that people in the outside world aren’t all blond, but still....”

Apparently, this was his first time looking at a person from the Far East. As Kazuya tried to pull himself away, Ambrose peered into his eyes and ran his fingers over his face, examining his bone structure.

Finally, Kazuya cried out, “Victorique, help me!”

Victorique’s only reaction was a bored snort. Then she looked up at Ambrose. “There’s a place I want you to show me.”

Ambrose answered with a smile. “It would be an honor. In exchange, may I please touch this person a little longer?”

“As you like.”

“Vi...!?”

Victorique snorted again and turned away from him. And then she softly said, “Bring me to the house where Cordelia lived.”

Ambrose’s fingers suddenly turned cold. His pulled his hands away from Kazuya’s face, and glared at Victorique. His face was no longer lively, and his eyes had become cloudy again like the rest of the villagers, leaving behind only a chilly expression.

Cordelia’s home stood by itself on the corner of a row of rectangular stone houses like a lonely island that had drifted away from the rest, its very existence treated as taboo. Painfully desolate, it had been left to the elements, and the water stains between the withered, twisted ivies painted dry, cracked patterns on the outer walls.

After leading them there, Ambrose made his escape, vanishing into the mist.

Kazuya’s thumping heart was threatening to burst out of his chest, but Victorique looked utterly relaxed as she turned the doorknob. The door was unlocked. Dirt had accumulated on the knob over a long period of time, and it stained the palm of Victorique’s small, soft hand coal black. Kazuya pulled out a handkerchief and tried to wipe her hand, but Victorique irritably shook him off, and entered the small house.

The room was old, and startlingly cramped.

Were all of the houses in this village like this? The room, partitioned by a bare stone wall, contained only a small kitchen, bedroom, and a box-like space that was too crude to call a fireplace, gathering dust along the wall. There was a well-worn desk and chair. A small wood-framed bed covered in a tattered cotton sheet. Every piece of furniture in the dim room was old and shabby.

The sight only compounded Kazuya’s image of the villagers’ dull

eyes and lifeless expressions. Realizing the difference between this room and the headman's luxurious mansion, he felt quietly amazed. *It's like it's not even the same village...!*

But as his eyes adjusted to the room where Cordelia Gallo had once lived by herself, he began to notice delicately girlish touches here and there. A glass jar for storing jam seemed to have been decorated with wildflowers, of which remnants were displayed on the windowsill. The curtains were frayed, but also festooned with daintily patterned hand-sewn lace.

A girl had lived in this room twenty years ago; of this Kazuya felt acutely sure. He suddenly felt a rich, feminine presence emanating from the room—even though she was no longer there, he could feel her drawing close, ever so sweetly.

That photograph that Victorique cherished so much...

She looked so much like Victorique, but that face belonged to an mysterious adult woman whose glamorous makeup was unfamiliar to him, who stared out at him with such grace...

He knew that Cordelia Gallo had once lived here.

Victorique scanned the room, saying not a word. Biting down tightly on her delicately red lips, she walked around the room, continuing her inspection.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't know. I'm looking for something."

Victorique turned around. Her expression was so frantic, with such deeply furrowed eyebrows, that Kazuya's face also turned serious.

"We can only stay in this village until tomorrow night. Once the festival is over, they'll have us leave. So I *must* find something by then..."

"All right..."

Victorique searched through the room. With each passing second,

her hands moved faster and faster. Dust flew into the air, and Kazuya broke into a coughing fit. At last, Victorique stopped herself, discouraged.

“...There’s nothing here.”

“Looks that way...”

“My mother left some kind of message. Something, in this village... I can’t shake this feeling. But I can’t find anything....” Victorique bit her lip fiercely. And then she crouched down, formed her small hand into a fist, and began to tap the floor, sending up white dust.

Kazuya started coughing again. “What are you doing?”

“I’m tapping the floor.”

“Well, I can see that....”

“If I find an area where the sound of the floor changes, that means there’s a cavity underneath.”

“...Then let me do it. You stand up.”

Kazuya knelt down and resumed Victorique’s tapping, starting from a corner of the room and working systematically across. When he finished the kitchen floor, he moved to the bedroom. Before long, he discovered a spot where the sound echoed loudly. Victorique scampered to his side.

Together, they lifted up the floorboard. A cloud of dust whirled into the air.

Below it was a small cavity; a shallow, square hole about the depth of two or three books. At first, it seemed to be empty, but when they took a closer look, they found a single photograph hidden beneath the dust.

The two of them exchanged a look.

Victorique reached out and picked up the old photograph. She wiped away the accumulated dust with her small white index

finger.

...It was the picture of a noblewoman.

Her piled up hair glittered with pearl ornaments, and she wore a dress open at the bosom. She cradled something in her arms—a baby, wrapped in a soft blanket fringed with silk and lace.

The picture of a mother and child—

And the lady's face was none other than that of Cordelia Gallo.

The same person in the photograph affixed to Victorique's gold coin pendant.

Was this a picture of Cordelia Gallo as an adult, taken with her child...?

“...Why would this picture be here?” murmured Victorique.

“There's something strange here, Kujou. Cordelia Gallo was banished from the village when she was fifteen years old, and she never returned ... or so I thought. And then a long twenty years went by. But she's already an adult in this picture, and if that infant is me, then this photograph would have been taken a bit more than ten years ago. Kujou...” She frowned. “What is the significance of this fragment? Where is this chaos heading?”

“Victorique...”

“Someone came here. Several years after Cordelia was driven away. And that someone came to this house, presumably to remove something that had been left in this hiding place. Moreover, that person left this picture of an adult Cordelia to serve as a secret message. Who was that person? How was he connected to Cordelia? And what did he take away from here?”

Victorique shook her head. “All I have are unknowns. But nevertheless, I've discovered one more fragment. One more!”

The two of them exited Cordelia's house and quietly closed the

door.

Victorique was engrossed in her thoughts and increasingly less willing to explain anything to Kazuya. She simply stood in front of the door, pensive and motionless.

Kazuya took out his handkerchief to brush away dust from Victorique's hair and clothes and wipe off the dirt clinging to her cheeks and palms. Then she started walking, and he followed after her, grumbling over his own dirty clothes. "Both of us are completely covered in dust now. And it's not like I brought a change of clothes, you know? And whose fault is that? Because last night you wouldn't tell me a thing about where we were going. ... Are you listening?"

Victorique merely snorted at him. She continued heading straight for the graveyard at the back of the church, her footsteps gradually quickening.

"Where are you going?"

"To see the grave of the man who was killed."

Kazuya grimaced, but reluctantly went on following her.

Once they entered the graveyard, passing through a veil of mist as thick as smoke, the air felt suddenly cooler. There were rows and rows of crumbling gravestones, entangled with dark green ivy. Visibility was poor in the heavy fog, and as Kazuya pursued Victorique, he had to rely on the fringe that peeped out from the hem of her billowing skirts and the long velvet ribbons that dangled from her hat to guide his way.

I guess I have no choice. Ugh! There's no way I could leave Victorique by herself in a weird place like this. I can't let her trip and fall into a hole or something.... I have to hang onto her....

At last, Victorique came to a stop, her lace-up leather shoes crunching over gravel.

Kazuya's eyes were drawn to a moss-covered stone cross that stood in front of them. Victorique's gaze bore into the cross, and her lips

pulled into a taut line.

Kazuya read aloud the name etched into the gravestone. "...Thé ... o ... dore."

That was the name of the headman who had been murdered twenty years ago. The inscription, written in archaic-sounding language, mentioned how he had been wise since his youth, that he had been a fine headman, that he had met an untimely end, etc. Kazuya was attempting to stumble through the grammar when suddenly Victorique cried out, "Oh!"

"What's wrong?"

"Kujou, look at this."

As she pointed, her finger seemed to tremble slightly.

And there he saw...

At the bottom of a cross jutting out of the soft soil of the graveyard, there was something half-buried by a mound of dirt—tiny handwritten letters, gouged into the cross with perhaps a sharp rock. Only the faint trace of a single letter was still visible. Victorique started to dig away the dirt with her small hands, like a small animal digging a hole to bury nuts. Kazuya hastily reached out to stop her, then dug with his own hands, working black dirt into his fingernails.

More letters were starting to appear. But there was still soil in the way, and it was hard to make them out.

Kazuya wiped the cross with his handkerchief. Little by little, the handkerchief turned black, and more letters gradually emerged into view—as if some strange power was bringing the past into the present....

As Victorique gazed at the words, her eyes filled with tears.

The words read...

I am not a criminal

C

The handwriting was small and shaky.

Victorique stared at the words for a long while, then stood up. She kicked the ground in an explosion of anger. Her leather shoe sank into the gravel.

Perhaps it was the sound she made, or perhaps it was her anger itself that vibrated the air—but something startled a flock of birds beyond the mist, and they took flight. The flapping of their wings seemed to go on without end, but then it finally faded into the distance.

From the dense, milky fog above them, a single white feather slowly drifted to the ground. Kazuya tracked it with his eyes until it came to a fluttering stop on top of the gravel.

The wind stirred up the fog.

Somewhere out of sight...

Kazuya thought he heard the faint sound of laughter.

The voice was very soft. It was a strange laugh, high-pitched and yet ice-cold, like a murmur from beyond the grave.

Kazuya immediately ran to Victorique's side. She was rooted to the ground as if she had heard nothing at all. "Cordelia wrote this," she whispered quietly.

"Victorique, let's get out of here."

"My mother was expelled from the village because of a false charge, just as I thought...."

"Victorique..."

"But then, where is the real murderer?" Victorique suddenly raised her head and looked at Kazuya. Reflected fog quivered in her emerald-green eyes, clouding them white. "Wouldn't it mean the culprit is still in this village?"

Again, out of nowhere, echoed that faint laughter.

Victorique's eyes mirrored the scene behind Kazuya. For a split second, as a gust of wind dispersed the thick, milky white fog, he thought he saw something in the form of a large black lump. He gasped and turned around, shielding Victorique behind himself.

This time, he heard it clearly.

The growl of a wild animal.

Grrrr....!

A low voice, resonating deep in the throat.

And then—

Grrrrrrr...!

The growl became louder.

A certain familiar stench appeared in the air. When Kazuya realized where he knew it from, he felt his chest constrict around his heart.

The zoo. It was the smell filling the zoo that he had visited with his family. The stench that emanated from the bodies of wild animals...

“Victorique, something's there!”

Kazuya took hold of her small hand. The fog was amassing ever more thickly over the cemetery, like a suffocatingly heavy blanket pinning them down from above. He started to run with his hands outstretched, trying to fling off the weight of the blanket.

“Kujou?”

“I said, there's something there! Run, Victorique!”

Victorique turned around. Her hat threatened to fly off her head, and she reached for it. Kazuya was quicker to notice, and he grabbed onto it, then started running with her again.

By now, it felt as if the animals' exhalations, agonized growls, and

stinking breath were closing in on the two of them. After emerging onto a cobblestone road, they heard not only the sound of their own running footsteps as they nearly tripped over themselves, but also the dry clatter of what sounded like hooves right behind them, the sound of four-legged feet slamming against the cobblestones over and over again.

Kazuya and Victorique ran to the front of the mansion. A fierce wind howled, and Victorique's long blond hair, like a velvet belt, swirled up into the air.

The fog was dissipating.

They opened the front door. Kazuya pushed Victorique's small body inside and then tumbled in after her.

He shut the door.

Outside, the growling continued. He could hear groans and ragged panting, and also loud scratching sounds, as if something was trying to pry the door open.

Kazuya stood perfectly still, holding Victorique tightly in his arms. She was breathing heavily, her eyes wide open, shrinking in on herself.

Several minutes passed.

The sounds and the presence disappeared.

Kazuya slowly opened the door, keeping Victorique safely behind him.

It was deserted outside, and the mist had vanished like a dream. The rain had also completely stopped, and the sun was shining down its hazy warmth.

Kazuya was just about to smile in relief...

...when he drew in his breath sharply, his gaze dropping down.

The bottom of the front door was streaked with several white claw

marks, as if an animal had tried to break through to the other side.

Kazuya and Victorique were slowly climbing the staircase on their way back to their guest rooms when they heard loud voices from the other end of the hallway.

Kazuya quietly walked up to the door to knock. *I think this room belongs to Alain, the bearded man who talks a lot...*

A voice answered, and when Kazuya peeked inside, he saw Alain, Derek, Raoul, and an unfamiliar woman.

They each had a hand of cards in a game of poker. Derek was in the middle of a losing streak; apparently, the woman found him to be an easy mark. He was loudly lamenting his defeat in his shrill voice, but Alain and Raoul merely watched him with jubilant smiles on their faces. Alain half-jokingly shouted advice at him, while Raoul grinned, his hulking body slouching. It was clear that neither of them cared a whit about the fate of Derek's wallet.

"...Where'd you go?" The strange woman raised her head and called out to Kazuya in an overly familiar tone. He stared at her blankly.

She was a young woman with flaming red hair. The ends of her hair spiraled into baby doll-like curls, carrot-red in intensity, as puffy as brightly colored cotton candy. But her eyes were a lonely blue-grey that Kazuya thought he had seen somewhere before.

A spectacular bosom peeked out from the square neckline of her simple white summer dress—it was large and round, and could almost be mistaken for a pair of buttocks. Her cleavage was dotted by tiny freckles the same color as those on her cheeks, in the shape of a charming red floral pattern.

When the woman noticed Kazuya staring at her with a troubled expression, she snapped exasperatedly, "Oh, please. Look, it's me!" She grabbed a nearby sheet and wrapped it around her head.

Kazuya was shocked. "What, is that you, Miss Mildred?!"

Sure enough, that face belonged to none other than Mildred, the nun with blue-grey eyes. But her entire aura had changed as if she had transformed into a different person. The moment she shed the stuffy, ill-suited nun's habit that she normally wore, her original sunny nature, radiant to the point of vulgarity, shone through in its full glory.

Mildred threw her head back and laughed uproariously. Waving her arms gaily in the air, she said, "All I did was change my hairstyle, and now you don't even recognize me anymore? What a gauche little boy!"

The three young men burst out laughing. Kazuya turned red.

While Kazuya and Victorique rested in the room, each of the six guests began to share what had happened to them in the meantime. Since the weather was poor and the villagers were unfriendly, the young men had holed themselves up indoors all day playing poker. At some point, Mildred had joined in, livening up the party.

"...We were chased by wolves." When Kazuya told them about how he and Victorique had run away from the cemetery, Mildred winced fearfully, but the men were rather excited.

"That sounds like fun!" shouted Alain, tugging on his beard. At this, Derek let out a squeaky laugh. Raoul quietly grinned.

Kazuya scowled, in no mood to be laughed at. "It wasn't fun at all."

"I remember the headman going on and on about the wolves around here."

"...Well, yes, he did."

"I guess we better be careful too, eh?" said Alain loudly. Derek laughed in his high-pitched voice again. Only Raoul seemed frightened, and he hunched over his large body in fear, creaking in his elegant, albeit old, wooden chair.

Alain turned to Mildred. "Forgot to ask, sister. What happened with

the phone?”

Mildred shook her head.

Alain’s words caught Kazuya’s ear, and he asked, “The phone...?”

“Yeah. The sister kept moaning about how she wanted to use the phone earlier, so she asked the headman. I hear they have electricity, and we thought maybe they have a phone, too.”

Kazuya suddenly remembered something. “That reminds me; I heard Miss Mildred calling someone on the phone at the inn last night, too...”

Mildred launched pointedly into a coughing fit. Kazuya let it drop.

Victorique, who had been silent all this time, suddenly spoke. “So they do have electricity?”

Kazuya caught her meaning, and raised his voice in surprise. “I know! In the middle of the mountains, with no contact with civilization, and yet they have electricity...?”

Alain grinned. “Exactly. It might surprise you, but the lights in this inn are powered not by oil or gas, but electricity. Yeah, this may be the middle of nowhere, but without a lot of houses to get in the way, it’s easy to set up. It’ll cost you, though! But I hear even the resorts on the Swiss side of the mountains are getting it these days.”

“But a place like this...”

“Right. It’s no tourist spot.” Alain nodded. And then he peered into Victorique’s face. “But from what you said, little girl. Did you already know about it?”

“To some extent, yes.” Victorique nodded.

Everyone turned to stare at the girl’s tiny form. In an instant, the room fell dead silent. Only Victorique herself looked perfectly calm.

She parted her small lips and began speaking swiftly. “The headman Sergius said earlier that the village is almost self-sufficient. Do all of

you really think that's possible? How would they acquire metals? Do they produce their own tea leaves and wine? That would be impossible. Besides, Sergius said that Théodore collected gold coins. And when he himself exiled Cordelia, he said that he gave her a single gold coin. This means that they possessed the same gold coins used in the outside world, and that they understood their value."

"Yeah..." Kazuya and Alain both nodded.

"So they must interact with the outside world to a certain extent. Even if they don't step outside of their village for the most part, the headman at the very least will still have that knowledge and that information. That's how they were able to send out that newspaper advertisement. And even though the coachman who drove our carriage here was afraid of this village, he seemed to have experience climbing up this mountain. He probably brings them their tea, wine, and also newspapers and magazines to this day."

Victorique abruptly halted her torrent of words.

Silence settled over the room.

And then...

Mildred had been busy shuffling cards, her mind elsewhere, but now she lifted her head. "You know, I asked that weird maid about that earlier. I found it odd that they had electricity here. And she said that they had a sponsor or something like that."

"A sponsor?" asked Kazuya.

"Yeah. What was his name again... Brian. Yeah, some man named Brian Roscoe. Sounds like he's a descendant of someone who left the village and lived on the outside. But no one seems to know much about him except that he's young and rich. They said that he found out about the village about ten years ago and donated some money. Must be an eccentric fellow, to want to bring electricity to a single village way up here in the mountains."

"...I see." Victorique nodded.

When Kazuya gave her a questioning look, she said, “I’ve been wondering the whole time for what possible purpose they would want to place an advertisement calling back descendants. But I suppose that they were only using the festival as a pretext to look for another descendant who would become their sponsor, much the way this Brian Roscoe did.”

“Hmm...”

“It’s for this reason that Sergius showed particular interest when he heard my noble surname. That’s why he went against the villagers who opposed my presence as Cordelia’s daughter, and invited us to his estate.”

“...Huh. You’re a noble? You got money?” asked Mildred, her face suddenly lighting up.

Victorique narrowed her eyes into a thin line. “There are absolutely no funds that I can operate under my own will.”

“...Huh.” Mildred threw her losing cards onto the table.

Victorique looked up at Kazuya expectantly. When Kazuya leaned over to her, wondering what she wanted to say, she whispered in his ear, low enough that no one else would be able to hear.

“...Ten years ago, a single descendant came to this village. Brian Roscoe came here with some objective in mind.”

“Some objective... To install electricity, right?”

“Somebody went into Cordelia’s house and removed something. That person left a photograph of Cordelia as an adult. Only someone who came to the village from the outside within the past twenty years could have done this. That would make the man known as Brian Roscoe the only candidate. But who is he? Where and how did he meet Cordelia, and for what purpose? What was the object that he removed from Cordelia’s hiding place under the floor?”

“Y-yeah...”

“Ten years ago, Kujou, would be around the time that the Great War began. That’s a fairly chaotic time to bring electricity to a mountain village, by my reckoning....” Victorique abruptly fell silent.

After this, she seemed to be mulling over something that only she knew. Kazuya couldn’t guess what she was pondering behind her somber eyes.

The card game seemed to be over. The quiet Raoul stood up and looked at the rest of the group.

“Sh-shall we listen to the radio?”

“...The radio?” asked Kazuya.

Derek replied with a little pride, “I’ve brought one. I thought I’d try connecting it since I heard they have electricity. But this is the middle of nowhere, so it might be hard to get a signal....”

“You brought a radio in your luggage?” Kazuya asked in amazement.

Derek walked up to a square radio that had been set on top of a chest. Next to the radio was a statue of the Virgin Mary and a decorative compass. He enthusiastically tinkered with the controls. The dial turned creakily, and a scratchy noise came out of the speakers.

The sound of a trumpet pierced through the cacophony.

Derek carefully adjusted the dial in search of that signal.

At last there was a break in the static, and slowly...

A jaunty melody began to flow from the speakers. It would occasionally drift into static, but they were still able to make out a melody. Derek raised the volume. The shrill sound of a trumpet boomed out. He looked up and grinned. “See?”

Kazuya smiled back. The lively music seemed to push away the sinister atmosphere in the village, and he felt his spirits rising. Alain whistled. Even Raoul was getting into a cheerful mood despite his reserved nature, and he began swaying his shoulders.

Mildred jumped happily to her feet and whistled, following Alain's lead. "Perfect! It's been so gloomy here; this will warm us right up. Someone dance with me!"

"...Say, are you really a nun?" Derek muttered, taken aback. Mildred ignored him, instead pulling on the arm of a bashfully resisting Raoul and forcing him to dance with her. The music gradually grew louder.

Apparently, Mildred's dancing also involved a lot of stomping about. She was clearly having fun. She twirled, and her red hair made a swishing sound, fanning out into the air.

Kazuya gazed idly at the dancing nun and the embarrassed Raoul.

He couldn't quite put his finger on it... but he was starting to get an uneasy feeling.

As if the walls were receding bit by bit, growing larger, making the whole room shake...

And he heard an earsplitting squeal.

With the increase in the radio's volume came a loud, uncomfortable screeching sound from the speakers. Frowning, Derek began manipulating the dial.

Then the radio suddenly made a strange shuddering noise, and shut off.

"Huh?" muttered Derek.

The room fell completely silent. Everyone turned to each other.

Derek fumbled with the radio, scowling. But no matter what he tried, it wouldn't turn back on.

“Is it broken?” Alain asked, sounding bored.

Derek’s shoulders trembled. Then he irritably raised his high-pitched voice and said, “Can’t be. It’s the latest model.” He continued experimenting with the controls in his frustration, trying every trick he had.

Outside the window, a cloud passed in front of the sun, and the light in the room suddenly dimmed.

Everyone quietly looked at one another. Mildred roughly plunked her backside down into a chair.

Victorique abruptly yawned. She gave her small body a good stretch, got up, and walked briskly out of the room. Kazuya also scrambled to his feet.

“Are you going back to your room?”

“Mmm. I need to unpack.”

“Oh. Then I should go back to my room, too....”

“No, you’re going to my room, to unpack my luggage.”

“Huh? That so?”

“That is so, Kujou.”

As they bickered, they walked down the hallway. The door closed after them.

Mildred lifted her head, and with her blue-grey eyes clouded with anxiety, she gave the closed door a long stare.

After the two of them returned to Victorique’s room, they occupied themselves with their own activities.

Kazuya knelt down on the floor and took Victorique’s belongings out of the small suitcase so that he could put them away inside the

room. He hung her dresses in the wardrobe of unfinished wood and neatly organized her various accessories on top of the mantelpiece. When he passed in front of the mirror built into the wall, his eyes happened to meet Victorique's in the reflection.

As for Victorique, she was sitting in a large rocking chair next to the window, puffing away at her pipe. The adult-sized rocking chair was unsurprisingly too big for her, swallowing up most of her body into the cushion of Gobelins tapestry. She had been steadily gazing out of the opened curtains of the window, where the stone balcony and tall oak trees disappeared and reappeared in the mist.... But she eventually directed her gaze back inside the room.

She was staring intently at Kazuya in the mirror.

"...What?"

"You are fastidious to an abnormal degree."

"Th-that's a rude thing to say. I'm just being normal."

Victorique didn't reply. She swiftly reached over to pull out the cushion from the rocking chair, and threw it on the floor. Kazuya automatically ran over to pick up the cushion, then wiped it off and returned it to her.

"Mmm. Well done."

"...What was that for?"

"Just confirming the fact that you are abnormally fastidious. That's enough proof for me. Once you've finished putting things away, you can go back to your own room."

"Okay... Hey, wait a minute. Why was I making such an effort to organize your luggage just now?"

"I could come up with a way to answer that mystery too, but sadly, it would be too much trouble. Now get out."

"Tch..." Kazuya hung his head.

Victorique averted her eyes from him, and with her pipe in one hand, returned to gazing lethargically at the dense fog outside of the window. Then she looked back at Kazuya. Seeing that he was about to leave the room, she called out his name to stop him.

“What?”

“I suppose no one in the village is aware of that message. The one Cordelia carved onto Théodore’s gravestone. ‘I am not a criminal. C’...”

“...I guess not. If anyone had noticed it, then they probably would have erased it.”

“I’m the one who found it, twenty years later.”

“Yeah...”

Victorique closed her mouth. She bit her lip tightly, and said no more.

Kazuya stood still, hesitating at the unyielding strength of resolve he sensed from her. He had the distinct impression that there would be no way to persuade her to go home at this rate.

And then he remembered how whenever her half-brother, Gréville de Blois, made one of his frequent visits to the conservatory of St. Marguerite’s School, he absolutely refused to make eye contact with his brilliant sister, as tiny and lovely as a doll.

And thought of the lurid rumor that circulated the school
—“Victorique de Blois is a Grey Wolf”....

And the sparkling eyes of his classmate, Avril Bradley, as she animatedly spoke of Victorique in mixed tones of fear and reverence...

No matter how close they had become, his small and beautiful friend was very much a mystery to him.

While he brooded to himself, a small, hard object thudded against the back of his head.

He put a hand to his head and turned around, only to find that small and beautiful friend of his, Victorique de Blois, sitting on the rocking chair, preparing to throw something else. He looked down at the floor, and saw it strewn with round, gold leaf-wrapped macarons that she had apparently been throwing for quite some time.

“What are you doing? Gosh! Stop making such a mess!”

“It took a while before I could get one to hit you.”

“Who’s going to pick them up?”

“You, of course.”

“...I don’t think so!”

Kazuya picked up every single macaron that lay on the floor and delivered them to Victorique, complaining all the while.

His concern for this strange girl, his irritation at being disrespected by her, and other unknown feelings that he found impossible to comprehend all tumbled together in his mind. When he tried to put them into words, all he could come up with was this.

“...I’m worried, Victorique. I want us to get out of here and go back to school as soon as possible.”

She didn’t reply.

“I’m worried about you. Nothing in this village makes any sense, and there’s even wolves roaming around....”

No answer came.

Kazuya picked up a pitcher and poured water into a red frosted glass. “...Getting this upset makes me ragingly thirsty.”

“My condolences.”

“...I don’t need to hear that! You’re the one who’s making me upset!”

Victorique pretended not to hear him.

Feeling his anger rising, Kazuya glanced down at the glass in his hands. He expected water to come out out of the pitcher, but he heard the sound of something else plop into the glass. When he peered inside, a shout almost escaped his lips. Victorique narrowed her eyes at him skeptically.

A small amount of water filled the glass, but there was also something round that floated on top...

Something with a black spot right in the center...

An eye.

Kazuya felt a strange chill, as if the temperature in the room had suddenly dropped.

It was smaller than a human eye, more like an animal's....

The floating orb rolled around in the water, and the black pupil turned to face him. They stared at each other. Kazuya was ready to shriek, but he realized that Victorique was watching him, and somehow managed to wrest himself into a calm enough state to put down the glass.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, nothing... J-just a bug. Later on I’ll go ask Miss Harminia to change the water.”

Kazuya returned the pitcher to the table.

His heart was pounding wildly.

three

[3]

As the sun slowly set, the quiet darkness of another day's end began to pervade the nameless village. Beyond the window of Victorique's room, through the opened curtains, the blazing sun sank onto the tall oak trees until it finally disappeared into the depths of the shadows. Once the sunlight had faded away, the village was dyed pitch black; only a veil of milky white mist swam through the dark, stirred by a feeble wind lingering from the day.

The dark, tangled branches of the oak trees formed an inky black skeleton, like a mass of skulls in the night.

"I'm closing the curtain, Victorique."

Kazuya stood up and pulled the cord that dangled from the top of the window. The heavy velvet curtain swayed shut.

Victorique had been slumped into the rocking chair for a long time by now, thinking quietly to herself. She had eaten a simple dinner with Sergius and the other guests, then retired to her room and hadn't moved since. Kazuya tried to speak to her, but regardless of whether she heard him or not, she made no attempt to respond. He sighed and sat back down on his original seat on top of her miniature suitcase.

Suddenly, they heard a knock from the door, and before they had a chance to answer, it slowly opened. Kazuya sat up. Someone came inside the room, accompanied by the soft rustling of fabric.

It was Harminia.

She was holding a large brass basin filled with water. "I've brought hot water for your bath. Please mix it with cold water," she said in a low voice.

Harminia opened the flimsy door to the bathroom at the back of the

room, set down the bucket, and left quickly. Kazuya frowned.

Her footsteps made not the slightest sound....

As if no one was walking there at all...

He sensed a strong contrast between her and the red-headed nun, Mildred. Whenever Mildred passed by, she walked with clomping footsteps even louder than a large man. But the sounds Harminia made were so faint, it was hard to tell that she was even there, and that was mysterious enough....

The moment she stepped through the door, Harminia suddenly spun back around. She stared at Kazuya and Victorique so hard that it seemed her eyes would pop out.

Her lips slowly parted.

Those thin, colorless lips.

“...If you need anything else, please ring the bell.”

“All right.”

The door closed.

Now Victorique’s mood suddenly brightened, and she hopped out of the rocking chair and skipped toward the bathroom, almost dancing. Kazuya watched her in curiosity as she started to pour hot water into the cream-colored bathtub with brass claw feet. She bent her small knees down to the black-and-white checkered tile floor and happily peered into the full bathtub.

She looked as if she would start humming a tune at any moment. Mystified, Kazuya asked, “What happened?”

Victorique raised her head, and answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “I like baths.”

“Really? Hmm. No wonder. I guess it’s true that you see all sorts of

unexpected sides to a person when you travel with them. Victorique, you like pretty things, and also baths, too.”

“ ... ”

“And then books and sweets, right? And frills and lace. And then ... what? Why are you giving me that threatening look?”

“Stop acting like you know the first thing about me.”

“...Hey, where did that come from?!”

Victorique ignored him and pulled out her bathing toiletries from her luggage, which included a comb of gleaming ivory, rose-scented soap, and a make-up mirror trimmed with gold leaf. Then she looked back at Kazuya and scowled.

“What?”

“The lady is taking her bath. Leave.”

“Ah! S-s-sorry!” Kazuya stood up and ran to the entrance of the bedroom, then turned around. “I’ll be in the hallway. If anything weird happens, call for me.”

There was no response.

Kazuya went out to the hallway and shut the door. He couldn’t help but sigh.

Now alone in the hallway, he suddenly felt unease surging through him. This village in the mountains and its inhabitants were all too bizarre. He didn’t know much about the other four who came on the trip either. Then there was the radio that broke down all of a sudden, and the eyeball floating in the water pitcher....

The more anxious he felt, the more the hallway seemed to lurch, as if the walls and ceiling were closing in on him from all sides. He shook his head roughly, unwilling to let his anxiety take over.

Victorique isn’t going to change her mind. Somehow I have to make sure nothing dangerous happens....

Finally...

Behind the door, he heard the faint sound of water inside. The splishes and splashes were very light, enough to make anyone listening think that a small cat had gone in the bathtub rather than a human.

Next, he heard the distant sound of Victorique's voice coming from the bathroom.

"Ah, ah, ah..."

"Victorique!?" Kazuya whirled around. He opened the door, ran into the room, and strained his ears.

Then...

"I love bathti-ime!"

"!?"

"It warms me u-u-up!"

She's ... singing?

Embarrassed at his panicked reaction, he leaned against the door and deliberately spoke in a less than courteous tone. "Whatcha doin', Victorique?"

"...I'm singing."

"Well, you're lousy!"

A wave of anger vibrated the air all the way from the bathroom to where Kazuya was standing.

After a long silence, when Kazuya was about to leave the room again, Victorique spoke in a low, resonant tone.

"Lousy, you say? Then you sing, Kujou."

"Whaat? N-no way. That's too embarrassing."

“Kujou ... sing.”

“...Ugh.” Kazuya regretted making fun of Victorique, but he was unable to defy her. He put both hands on his hips, thought of a children’s song that he had often sung in his homeland, and began to sing in a clear voice.

He used to sing this song as a child before his voice changed. Whenever his mother and sister heard his cherubic voice, they would always clap and praise him. “Our Kazuya is so good at singing! Your dear father and brothers can’t sing at all.” However, when his father and brothers heard him, they would scold him for his unmanly behavior. And so Kazuya grew up into the type of man who wouldn’t so much as hum even when alone. But now, finding himself singing for the first time in a long while, he was gradually warming up to it.

As Kazuya threw out his chest and sang in a full voice, he heard an object strike the inside of the bathroom door, followed by, “Shut up!”

“...B-but you’re the one who ordered me to sing!” Tears prickled Kazuya’s eyes, and he stopped singing.

And then he added in a small voice, “I’m good, huh?”

There was no answer.

Hanging his head, Kazuya fell silent.

The room again turned quiet. Other than some faint watery sounds, all he could hear was his own heartbeat and the velvet curtains as they fluttered softly in the wind.

Sometimes, the white mist outside the curtains would wander into the room, but it would quickly dissipate.

All was still.

A wolf howled in the distance.

A bird flapped its wings.

...In the corner of Kazuya's vision, he saw something move.

He realized something was amiss, and looked up. *Something definitely moved; I saw it with my own eyes*, he thought to himself. He carefully surveyed the room, but saw nothing unusual.

...There has to be something in here. I'm sure I saw something move just now....

He saw the canopy bed.

The small chest of drawers.

The rocking chair and elegant turntable.

The wardrobe.

The velvet curtain.

The mirror built into the wall.

...The mirror?

Kazuya gave it a hard stare.

Something was moving in the mirror—in the bed, under the fluffy down quilt. It was tucked in tightly enough that no one should have been under it, but for some reason there was a small lump underneath.

Kazuya turned around to look at the bed. But the quilt was neatly tucked in just as he had seen it earlier.

He looked back at the mirror.

In the reflection, the lump under the quilt was slowly expanding.

The lamplight flickered, darkening the room slightly.

The quilt in the mirror was gradually inflating; soon the lump became the size of a person, and was growing even larger....

Kazuya cried out. His first instinct was to run into the hallway ...

but then he remembered Victorique, and turned back toward the bathroom. He pounded on the thin door.

“Victorique! Victorique! Are you okay?!”

...No answer.

Kazuya thought again of the radio that had shut off with no warning, and the eyeball in the water pitcher.

Something's wrong.... There's something wrong! Victorique!

The lamp went out, and without warning, the room was engulfed in darkness.

Kazuya clung to the bathroom door in an effort to protect Victorique. He called out her name over and over, but there was no response.

Kazuya screamed.

And then...

All of a sudden, the lamp turned back on.

The bulging bed in the mirror's reflection had also returned to normal.

“...You're being awfully noisy, you know. What the devil is all the fuss about?”

Victorique didn't emerge from the bathroom for another ten minutes. She was wearing a billowing nightgown of white frills and aqua-blue ladder lace, and a white satin bonnet. Half of her long blond hair was gathered into her headdress, and the rest of it spilled down her back.

Kazuya was sprawled out in a chair, utterly spent.

Victorique frowned. “That's *my* chair.”

“....”

Kazuya stood up.

Then he opened his mouth and began a disjointed account of the baffling phenomenon that had just taken place. But for some reason, Victorique merely gave a bored yawn, then went back to carefully putting away her bathing supplies and hunting around the room for her bag of macarons.

“Victorique, let’s go home tomorrow morning, as soon as possible,” said Kazuya anxiously.

Victorique looked up at him, surprised. “Why?”

“I told you, it’s dangerous here. All these strange things are happening.... This whole village is strange. I mean, isn’t it bizarre how the radio just stopped working so suddenly....”

“The radio?” Victorique groaned. Then Kazuya heard her quietly mumble, “What a pain!”

“Wh-what?”

“That was just a trick, you know.”

“You’re kidding?!”

Victorique yawned widely, then continued, not in the mood to resist him. “Do you remember what else was on top of the chest where the radio was sitting?”

“On top of the chest? Well, there was the radio, and a statue of the Virgin Mary, and a decorative compass....” Kazuya lapsed into thought.

Victorique’s words were interspersed with yawns. “Compasses have magnets. If a device that uses electricity is placed next to a magnet, then it’ll go haywire. Although I don’t know whether it was just a coincidence or if someone put it there on purpose.”

“Victorique, does that mean...” Kazuya frowned. “Are you saying

that you knew all along?”

“Of course.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me! Everyone was spooked by that, me included!”

“I had other things on my mind.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake....”

Victorique sat down in her rocking chair and watched Kazuya groan. Then she climbed back out and threw her hands up in defeat. “Kujou, you are a selfish man!”

“As if you’re any better!”

“You leave me no choice. I shall articulate it so that even a selfish, half-witted savant such as you, Kujou, may understand.”

“Well, excuse me for that.”

“In exchange, I don’t want to hear any more of your talk about me leaving. I am not leaving.”

“...F-fine.”

Victorique walked out with tiny steps into the hallway. Kazuya tried to follow her, but she said, “You stay here.”

“All right.”

“And close your eyes until I say when. In the meantime, you may reflect on your sins.”

“Reflect on my sins?! What sins?!”

Kazuya reluctantly closed his eyes, just as she had told him.

He heard her leaving the room, and the door closing.

For now, it was quiet.

Then there was a rattling sound somewhere nearby. Kazuya wanted to open his eyes, but he swallowed his impatience and kept hold of himself.

At last, he heard Victorique's voice, and it sounded very close, even though he was sure that she had left the room.

"That's enough. Open your eyes."

Kazuya opened his eyes.

In the mirror hanging on the wall in front of him, at around chest height, something resembling the top of Victorique's head appeared in the reflection. He caught just a glimpse of her white satin bonnet and glossy blond hair.

He also heard her voice.

"You understand, don't you, Kujou the half-witted savant?"

"Not in the least. Victorique, where are you?"

Moving closer, he realized that the mirror had been removed, and the space now opened up like an indoor window. Across it, he saw another bedroom that looked like a mirror image of this room, and there was Victorique, straining as hard as she could to stand on her tiptoes and poke her head out of the rectangular hole.

But no matter how much she stretched, she couldn't quite reach it. She gave up and ran out of view, then returned carrying a small box to use as a step stool. The box seemed light enough, but she had to carry it along very slowly, gritting her teeth as if it were very heavy.

Victorique stepped onto the box, and this finally allowed her to reach the same height as Kazuya. She popped her head through the hole. "See?"

"Huh."

Realizing that Kazuya was still in the dark, Victorique stamped her feet on top of the box. "Basically, someone entered this room and

removed the mirror. Kujou, you weren't looking at a mirror. Someone slipped into the bed on this side and made a lump under the covers to scare you."

Kazuya locked eyes with Victorique.

Now that she was standing on a step stool, their faces came to the same height for once. He stared deeply into Victorique's large green eyes.

"You understand now, don't you?" She widened her eyes and watched him closely, concerned over whether he really understood.

A shadow crossed over Kazuya's face.

"Wh-what's wrong, Kujou?" she stammered.

"So, basically, what you're saying is someone did that deliberately."

"Yes, that's right. So there's nothing to worry about."

"There's a lot to worry about!"

Victorique's eyes widened further, startled by Kazuya's sudden shout.

Frustrated at having no outlet for his feelings, Kazuya kicked the floor a few times. "I'm fine with it being a ghost. I mean, this place is practically a haunted house. But the one behind all this is a human.... And this isn't my room, Victorique, it's yours. Someone did that on purpose to frighten you. Right?"

"...."

"Victorique..."

"...."

"Who would do something like that, and why?"

"I don't know who. It has to be one of the villagers. But I can guess the reason why. It's because I'm Cordelia's daughter," she replied,

lowering her voice. Her eyes darkened, and her small face turned expressionless. Kazuya watched her closely.

Victorique's voice started to tremble. "It could be the act of a villager who believes Cordelia is a criminal who brings misfortune.... Or it could be the act of the real murderer, afraid I'll discover the truth...."

"Victorique..."

Memories of the villagers' dull green eyes flashed through the back of Kazuya's mind—when they raised their weapons and tried to drive them away, and then Sergius arriving at last, allowing them to enter the village. Harminia and her naked eyeball as she identified Victorique from the group of visitors and denounced Cordelia for her crime. And Ambrose, who had chatted with them so amiably, only to suddenly turn cold when the topic of conversation changed....

And yet Kazuya also felt Sergius' presence lurking behind all of these events. What if his efforts to protect the village had something to do with the truth that Victorique sought...?

Victorique's voice was stubborn. "I still refuse to leave!"

"But it's dangerous!"

Kazuya and Victorique both stamped their feet, their mutual glares split by the wall.

"But Kujou, you'll..." Victorique's words trailed off hesitantly. Her face turned solemn. "You'll protect me, won't you? ...If you even came all the way here without a single piece of luggage."

"Of course I will!" Kazuya shouted.

They stared into each others' eyes, glaring at each other with none of their usual friendliness. This was a dangerous gaze, as if they were about to partake in a duel. The two of them continued to stare at each other, saying nothing.

And then suddenly...

The door to Victorique's room flung open.

Standing there was Mildred, her red hair like a baby doll's, twisted into curls. By all appearances, she was in a very bad mood.

"Hey, kids! Listen to this!"

She entered the room with lead-footed steps. This reminded Kazuya of how Harminia made no sound at all when she brought hot water earlier, and he again had to marvel at how the two women were poles apart. Mildred strode through the room, then noticed Victorique's face peeking out of the square hole. Giggling, she pointed at Victorique, and poked the tip of her nose.

Victorique squirmed away from her like a kitten being harassed by a grownup human, and blinked her eyes repeatedly in surprise.

"What are you up to, you wee little thing?"

Victorique's face changed color. Kazuya was inwardly startled.
Could it be that she's sensitive about her height...?

But Mildred was just getting started, and stomped around the room as she spoke. "They're a bunch of idiots! Those men ... those foolish men! All three of them: that bearded Alain, rich boy Derek, and that silent Raoul. And I even tried to get along with Derek since they said he's rich."

"J-just because of that...?"

"I love money!" Mildred roared angrily. "More than fine wine, more than pretty dresses, money is what I love, more than anything!"

Kazuya and Victorique had to give each other a look, remembering the Dresden plate that Mildred had stolen at the flea market.

The moment she started talking about money, there was somehow a complete change in Mildred's atmosphere, which had previously seemed so coarse and vulgar. Sticky sweet droplets of sensuality burst from her voluptuous body, impregnated with a fragrant, rich

scent like floral perfume.

What just happened...? Kazuya stared at her, slightly appalled, as she went on and on about her love of money.

“But wine and dresses are things you buy with money,” Victorique pointed out.

Mildred pretended she didn't hear that. “Anyway, they're are acting like they're sightseeing. It's the night before the midsummer festival and all the villagers are on edge, but those guys are taking field trips to the church. I heard that the festival is the one time of year the church has to stay empty. They sure seem to have a lot of rules about all this stuff. So I went with them, and what do you think they did? There was this old vase that looked like the villagers really treasured it. So they took this fancy vase and dropped it into a basin of holy water. See, they kept badgering them about wanting to see it, said it might be interesting, and when they got a good look at it, they started laughing at the villagers for hanging onto crummy old stuff like that. The villagers were fuming. Then finally, plop! And not just once, either. All three of them wanted to see what would happen, so they each dropped it in... At least they didn't break it. For God's sake... That headman, Sergius, had steam coming out of his ears, he was so mad. Those idiots only see new things as worthwhile; they don't know what real value is.”

While Mildred was speaking, she picked up the red frosted glass next to the pitcher and gulped it down without looking at the contents. She began to cough violently.

“S-something in the water... Something round... Did I swallow it?”

“...Ah!” *The eyeball!* Kazuya realized, but he chose to keep that to himself, and said instead that it must have been a piece of candy. She nodded, accepting his explanation.

Mildred tramped out of the room, and silence returned in her place.

Victorique came back through the hallway from the other room.

She and Kazuya said little to each other. He compulsively checked the lock on the door over and over, moved the wardrobe in front of the mirror to make sure no one could enter from the neighboring room, and closed the window securely, sealing the room as best he could.

“Victorique, I’ll stay in this room. I’ll be right by the door, so if anyone tries to come in, I’ll beat him up.”

“Hmm. How manly of you.”

“Come on, be serious! I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but you’re the one who’s in danger!”

Kazuya put the rocking chair in front of the door and sat down heavily, closing his eyes.

...but found himself unable to sleep. As the most sensitive member of his family, even a mere change of pillow would have made it impossible for him to sleep. There was no way he could fall soundly asleep in a rocking chair of all places.

When he softly voiced this complaint, Victorique turned to him gleefully. “Say ... Do you happen to remember that splendid cot I had packed inside my luggage?”

“In your luggage?” Kazuya repeated in bewilderment. “You mean ... that stupidly huge suitcase with enough room for a whole family to move to the New World?”

“Hmm?! You’re the stupid one. I exhausted my intellectual powers to determine the absolute minimum necessary to take with me.... But no, you had to arrogantly lecture me and leave it behind, so take responsibility and sleep in that rocking chair.”

“...Well, at least I’m pretty sure you didn’t need that vase or that tea set.”

She threw more invective at him, and another macaron came sailing through the air. Kazuya angrily picked up the fallen candy from the floor and returned it to its original spot.

“Victorique...?” He looked up again, but her mind was elsewhere, and she was no longer looking at him. He sighed, and sat back down into the rocking chair.

The night wore on, and the manor grew silent.

Kazuya dimmed the wall lamp and decided to try falling asleep.

Victorique had turned on her side in the large canopy bed. Kazuya could hear her taking soft breaths. He closed his eyes, trying to force himself to sleep in the rocking chair.

Then he took a closer look at Victorique, who had fallen asleep some time ago. He saw the back of her small head. She was lying on her stomach, her face stuffed into the large, fluffy pillow.

“...That’s an interesting sleeping position.”

Her breathing was quiet and rhythmical.

From this angle, Victorique looked so small in the huge bed, like a long-haired white puppy that had gotten tangled in the covers and fallen asleep.

Soon he heard the tolling of a grandfather clock.

One, two, Kazuya began to count. The clock made it to twelve chimes, then stopped. He realized that it was already twelve o’clock at night, and that he should sleep, too.

With worry in his heart, Kazuya slowly closed his eyes.

monologue three

I awoke at midnight, sensing a presence.

In the manor, there was no sound but the strange echoing of the wind blowing faintly outside my window.

I carefully approached the door to my room, and listened.

“...So, in the middle of the festival...”

Someone was speaking softly. I heard the low voices of men from down the hallway.

“None of the villagers will notice....”

“...Yeah. No way *he’ll* notice, either....”

The men spoke in hushed tones.

“Move it in the car. If we can make it down the mountain to the town, the car’s parked there.”

Anger bubbled up inside of me.

I had a feeling that something like that was going on, but now I knew for sure.

The men went on discussing their plans for tomorrow, never once suspecting that someone could be listening in.

“Do it during the festival and the villagers won’t even notice. The church’ll be empty sometime tomorrow.”

“We’ll go down the mountain. And then...”

And then...?

one

chapter four – red turnip lanterns and the Winter Man

[1]

Dawn slowly approached the nameless village. Kazuya rocked back and forth in the rocking chair in the corner of the room, where he would wake up from a light doze and then fall back asleep, time and time again.

Each time he awoke, he found Victorique sleeping in a different position in another spot on top of the huge canopy bed, moving from one corner to the other. Half-dreaming, he wondered, *Victorique... When did you move...?*

The sudden pounding of a large drum announced the arrival of dawn at last. Next came the keen wail of a flute, high and thin, cutting through the dim light of daybreak.

Kazuya sprung awake. While he scrambled to his feet, Victorique was in the middle of drowsily climbing out of bed. She rushed over to the window, then turned to Kazuya who walked up behind her. His eyelids were still heavy with sleep, but Victorique was wide awake—the same way she always looked whenever they met in the conservatory, with those eyes that were quiet and yet sharp. Most of her long blond hair spilled out from her white satin bonnet, rippling down to the floor in golden waves.

“Good morning, Kujou.”

“...’Morning, Victorique. What was that just now?”

“Well, let’s see. My best guess is that...” As Victorique murmured this, she yanked on a cord that hung down from the ceiling.

The heavy velvet curtain swayed and parted to both sides.

Outside the window...

...a scene completely different from the previous day unfolded before them.

Unlike yesterday, when milky white fog had obscured almost everything but the stone balcony and the tall oak trees, today the air was clear, offering a good view far into the distance even though the sun was just starting to rise. It was a fine day, and a dry wind blew. The sound of drums vibrated the air, followed by the piercing cry of flutes.

Countless brightly colored flags fluttered in the wind, all of them depicting a coat of arms of a wolf on a black field.

Someone was splashing water—presumably holy water—toward the morning sky. The spray soared up to the balcony, leaving wet marks on the stone.

A whip cracked, and somewhere a gun was fired.

“My guess is that—”

Kazuya finished her words for her. “The midsummer festival already started, huh.”

“Mmm.”

They looked at each other. Then they ran out onto the balcony, leaned over the mossy stone railing, and let their eyes feast on the sights outside.

Bright red lumps were unsteadily entering the town square. No matter how Kazuya squinted, trying to figure out what the tottering shapes were, he couldn’t identify them. They seemed to be large floats, but they burned all over in a brilliant orange color like lumps of fire.

The villagers paraded through the square, shouting noisily, making yesterday’s impenetrable silence feel like a distant memory.

While the two of them were transfixed by the happenings in the square, a polite knocking came from the door. Kazuya responded, leaving the balcony to go back inside the room.

He opened the door, and in front of him was a young man with his long blond hair pinned back. He was taller than most of the villagers, and had an exceptionally beautiful face with eyes that were clear and candid. It was the headman's assistant, Ambrose.

"...I was passing by in the hallway and heard voices, so I thought you might already be awake."

Ambrose was carrying some strange-looking objects in his hands. One was a life-sized papier-mâché figure wrapped like a mummy in a cloth the color of yellow ochre, and the other was a wooden mask carved into a black, fearsome-looking face.

As Kazuya stared at them, Ambrose smiled. "These are a papier-mâché figure and a mask that we use during the festival. Do you find them unusual?"

"Yes."

"From where I'm standing, your belongings are far more unusual...."

Ambrose discreetly took a peek inside the room, his gaze wandering among the novel objects. Then he again gave Kazuya's face a close inspection, and reached out his hand in curiosity. Kazuya jumped away from him. To have his cheeks pinched or his hair pulled was quite distasteful to him.

Alerted by the sound of voices, the doors to the other rooms opened one by one. Alain walked sleepily into the hallway, scratching his beard. Derek was wearing silk pajamas, and clearly expensive ones at that, but they were wrinkled, as if he had been tossing and turning in bed. Raoul sluggishly dragged his large body outside.

Finally, the door to Mildred's room opened. She walked out into the hallway, her footsteps so loud that it was hard to believe they belonged to a woman. Her bright red curls bounced.

Victorique left the balcony and walked briskly toward Kazuya.

“Master Sergius may have mentioned this yesterday.... But our village’s midsummer festival celebrates a bountiful summer harvest, and acts as a rite to burn and defeat winter. And then we call back the spirits of our ancestors and let them see their descendants enjoying the blessings of the harvest,” Ambrose explained smoothly as he led the travelers to the town square. Since most of the villagers had assembled in the square, the manor was left deserted.

“We can’t let the church stay empty, so some people are gathered there. The rest of them are in the square.”

“It’s quite a different sight from yesterday,” remarked Kazuya.

Ambrose smiled. “That’s because everyone was busy preparing for the festival. We almost ran out of time to finish the red turnips.”

“Red turnips?”

“The lanterns for the floats... Look!”

Once the group arrived at the square, their eyes widened in surprise as they took in the sight of the floats burning like huge round flames.

Arrayed all over the floats were small orbs that glowed orange. Taking a closer look, they saw that these were red turnips with their insides hollowed out and their outsides carved in a variety of patterns. Small candles stood inside of them, and their tiny flames flickered along with the movement of the floats. Each little flickering added up to make the floats appear as if they themselves formed shuddering flames, writhing in all directions.

“It’s beautiful,” Victorique said.

Ambrose heard her, and nodded happily. “The villagers were busy carving them. My job was to make this out of papier-mâché.... I’m not very handy, so it wasn’t an easy task.” He gently placed the mummy of yellow ochre onto the float.

“What’s that used for?” asked Kazuya.

“We call it the ‘Winter Man.’ At noon, the villagers will dress up in

costumes, divide into two groups, and reenact the battle between the Winter Army and the Summer Army. The Winter Army wears brown clothing, and the Summer Army wears blue. The Summer Army finally vanquishes the Winter Army and sends them scattering, and we set fire to the Winter Man and the float it rides on. Then we celebrate the victory of summer with food, drink, and dance.”

“Wow...”

“After that, the church is emptied. The church is a side door to the land of the dead, so our ancestors use it to return and witness our harvest. At the end of the festival, a returning ancestor wears this mask....”

Ambrose held up the fruit of his labor: the unearthly-looking mask.

“And dances in celebration of the harvest. The ancestor speaks to us in words we don’t understand. It is thought that those words are in the language of the dead.”

As Ambrose spoke, Harminia came up from behind him. Her eyes bulging, she stared hard at the mask that he was holding, then suddenly smiled so fiercely that it seemed her mouth would tear open, apparently appreciative of the quality of the mask. “Well done,” she muttered in a vanishingly soft voice.

Ambrose looked pleased. “This year, I’ll be the one wearing it.”

“...Because you’re in line to be the next headman,” Harminia said in a low voice. Kazuya and Victorique stared at her curiously.

Then she said in an even lower voice, “The headman is accompanied by a younger assistant. When the headman dies, the assistant takes his place. Master Sergius served as assistant to Master Théodore. That means Master Sergius thinks very highly of Ambrose.”

“I see....”

Kazuya and Victorique again gazed at Ambrose. His comely face, as finely featured as a noblewoman, was bright red. He shook his head

in embarrassment. “It’s also because there aren’t enough young people. This village doesn’t have many children.”

The floats began to spin very slowly. A blur of red turnips turned round and round, painting red lines like an afterimage across the square.

While they were mesmerized by the sight, the bearded Alain suddenly clicked his teeth and exclaimed, “What rubbish!”

Ambrose gasped.

Harminia’s eyes popped out.

At this particular moment, the sound of drums and flutes had stopped, and the square happened to be temporarily enveloped in silence. Every single villager turned around. Their dark eyes roamed toward the group of travelers, searching for the origin of the voice.

Alain had been making such comments ever since he entered the village, but this was the first time he did so in such an attention-grabbing manner. Even he seemed to be surprised at the reaction, but it was too late for him to take back his words. He indignantly dug in his heels.

“To think that such superstitions still exist in this day and age. Uncharted territory? The village of the grey wolves? What a load of rubbish!”

This was normally Derek’s cue to chime in with his squeaky voice, but instead he merely stood silently beside him.

Alain snapped, a little nervously, “Right, Raoul?”

Finding himself suddenly called upon, Raoul cringed, shrinking his large body, and he scratched his chin in dismay. “...Y-yeah.”

“The spirits of your ancestors? You think you can bring those back? You’ve been making fools of yourselves all day!”

Alain still wasn’t done, but now Derek tactfully put a stop to him. “Yeah, they’ve sure been making a lot of racket. Hey, Alain, let’s go

back inside and play some poker.”

Alain nodded, and the three of them started to stroll back to the manor. Harminia’s low, resonant voice called them to a halt. “Stop right there, good sir.”

In the meantime, the villagers had begun to amass behind her. They seemed to fuse together with Harminia as they stared at the three men with unnerving expressions. They stood motionless, wide-eyed and stony-faced. In their antiquated clothing, they could have been mistaken for a band of ghosts. When Alain looked back at them, his overconfident attitude crumbled, and he flinched.

“Wh-what do you want!”

“If you’re going to insult us, then get out of this village.”

“What? Some maid like you thinks she can tell a guest what to do?!” Alain shot back.

But Harminia wouldn’t be silenced. “The spirits of the dead really do...”

“R-really do what? Say it!”

“They really do come back!”

“Rubbish!”

“They come down from the night sky, through the church and on to the square, and they speak in the language of the dead. We don’t understand what they say. But nothing can be hidden from them. So there is meaning in the midsummer festival.”

Harminia’s face made it clear that she believed in the festival with all her heart. She turned to Ambrose and glared at him sharply, silently ordering him to say something. The expression on his face wasn’t quite as fervent as her own, but she didn’t seem to notice that.

Just as Alain was about to shout even more stubbornly, Ambrose quietly stopped him. “Good sir, you have a right to your opinion,

but if you are going to disrupt the festival, then I will have to ask you to leave.”

“...I, I’d rather not,” Alain muttered, suddenly starting to fidget. Apparently he wasn’t willing to leave the village.

The three young men formed a huddle and conferred with each other. Derek seemed to be scolding Alain shrilly. One of his reproachful whispers leaked out: “Wherever you go, you always have to pick a fight....” Raoul stood quietly, looking shaken.

After a while, Alain looked up and jokingly raised his hands. “Fine. I won’t disturb your festival. We’ll just stick to our rooms and keep our mouths shut. Okay?”

Ambrose smiled and inclined his head. Harminia scowled threateningly at the three men as they departed.

Now Ambrose was looking a little less cheerful than before. Kazuya said to him soothingly, “You know ... we have a slightly similar custom in the country where I was raised.”

“In your country?”

“Yes, well ... it’s an island nation, a long, long way from here by sea. We have this long-cherished custom of welcoming our ancestors’ return on a certain day in summer. Well, whether we actually believe in it or not might be a little complicated, but we go with our families to visit the graves and give offerings.”

“Wow ... So in your country...”

Ambrose’s interest was piqued and he began to ask questions. Thus, for some time afterward, Kazuya ended up explaining the geography of his country and of the world, global affairs, and various other topics. To his surprise, Ambrose knew nothing of the Great War that had ended only a few years before. He knew that a conveyance called the airplane existed in the outside world, and remembered a lot more than usual flying overhead during that period.

The life he had lived was little removed from that of a hermit. But

even though Ambrose's lifestyle was medieval in every respect, he was startlingly quick to understand what was said to him, and over the course of a conversation no longer than ten minutes, instantly grasped all sorts of concepts. Like any healthy young person hungry for knowledge, he asked one carefully thought out question after another, and hungrily absorbed Kazuya's answers. His clear green eyes sparkled with curiosity.

He really is smart! Kazuya thought admiringly. *Now I can kind of see where the legend of the Grey Wolves came from. It's almost like the conversation in that diary Victorique showed me, when that sixteenth century traveler met that young wolf in the mountains. The brilliant, silent Grey Wolves...*

Ambrose's questions were stretching on without end, and his thirst for knowledge remained unquenched. Finally, he took a breather, and then said, a little red-faced, "Long ago, when I was a child ... a descendant of this village paid us a visit. Brian Roscoe was his name. I pestered him with my questions too, and in the end, Master Sergius gave me a harsh scolding."

"Oh, I think I've heard that name before.... He's the one who brought electricity to this village, isn't he?"

"Yes. But he left as soon as he finished setting up the construction work," Ambrose said wistfully.

two

[2]

After the commotion at daybreak, the villagers returned to their homes, ate a simple breakfast, then reassembled in the town square after noon.

They extinguished the lanterns on the floats, leaving only the brightly colored banners that flapped violently in the wind around the perimeter of the square. The echoes of cracking whips and firing pistols still continued to reverberate.

Ambrose explained that the reenactment of the Summer Army's victory over the Winter Army, which was meant as a prayer for a bountiful harvest, would soon begin. Kazuya visited Alain and Derek's rooms to invite them to observe the festivities, but although the three young men appeared to be in, they didn't bother to respond to his knock; presumably they were still in a surly mood. According to Mildred, the three of them were keeping quiet in their rooms without exchanging any words, seemingly avoiding each other.

"I guess we can just watch from our balconies," she added in a bored mumble.

Kazuya and Victorique ended up being the only ones to head to the square, walking hand in hand.

They happened to arrive at the same moment that young girls wearing red skirts were running into the square. The girls stood in the center and curtsied, each with a basket in one hand.

Sergius, the headman, leisurely passed by with Ambrose, who was talking animatedly. Ambrose noticed Kazuya and Victorique observing the square from one of the corners, and he looked back at them. "You're in a dangerous spot!"

"Dangerous?"

“Well, dangerous might not be the word for it. Let’s just say it might be a little painful.”

“P-painful...?”

Ambrose walked away, giggling mischievously. Kazuya looked down at Victorique; she was scowling. *Painful...? Painful...? Oh, no!*

Remembering that Victorique was sensitive to pain, Kazuya pulled her hand to move her away. She kept swiveling her head around, trying to get a view of the square and the villagers. As Kazuya tugged on her, she gave him a dubious look.

“Where do you think you’re taking me?”

“Well, I’m not quite sure myself...”

Once they had moved to a different spot, a chorus of excited squeals came from the girls and they put their hands in their baskets. They counted down in unison, then grabbed handfuls of hard hazelnuts and flung them into the air.

Hazelnuts flew in every direction.

The villagers watched with smiles on their faces.

Hazelnuts were piling up in the location where Kazuya and Victorique had been standing only moments ago. Then they saw a young man wearing a beard, glasses, and hat come wandering through.

“There’s Alain,” murmured Kazuya. “And I just invited him, too. Maybe his curiosity got the better of him and he came to watch the festival after all....”

The girls sang prayers for the good harvest in between their excited shrieks, and threw a torrent of hazelnuts at the man. The nuts landed on him with hard, dry thumps, and he fled, jumping in pain. The girls laughed gaily and searched the area for their next passerby to hit. Young men from the village deliberately strayed close, and the girls merrily pelted them with nuts. The men ran away in a hurry. Girlish voices and cries of pain swelled through

the square as the cycle repeated itself.

“Ouch! That looks like it hurts!” Kazuya yelled. *We dodged that one. I should thank Ambrose later. If we’d stayed in that spot, then Victorique would be in a lot of pain right now, and I’d have a big problem on my hands....*

He quietly gazed at her standing next to him.

She was observing the villagers’ every move as intently as ever.

At last, the village maidens had emptied their baskets, and they laughingly dispersed. Then the young men divided themselves into the Winter Army, dressed in brown clothing and riding on horseback, and the Summer Army, wearing blue clothing and brandishing spears, and began to perform the dance that symbolized their battle.

The girls shrieked and cheered on the Summer Army. On the periphery, elderly men shouted hoarsely, while shakily stomping the ground in a dance of their own.

It was a long performance.

The Summer Army finally prevailed, and the Winter Army scattered. A young man standing at the center of the Summer Army announced their victory in a ringing voice.

“Hey, is that...?” Kazuya suddenly realized that this was Ambrose.

Seeing Ambrose like this reminded him of how different he seemed from all of the other youths in the village. The Grey Wolves in the village had cloudy eyes that rejected change, but Ambrose was different—his eyes brimmed with a youthful radiance.

As Ambrose, clad in blue, waved the torch in his hand, he proudly declared the victory of summer and the coming of a good harvest. “O Winter Man, burn to ashes and begone!” he proclaimed, and held his torch above the float in the center of the square.

On top of the float lay the figure of yellow ochre papier-mâché that he had made—the papier-mâché Winter Man. The float and papier-mâché had both been constructed out of flammable materials, and as soon as Ambrose let the torch fall, they were immediately engulfed in flames, burning with a loud roar.

But seconds later...

Something stood up on top of the float.

Ambrose cried out. His face was stricken with dread, and his mouth was open wide, letting out an endless scream.

What stood up was the papier-mâché figure. That life-sized dummy wrapped in a blanket of yellow ochre was standing on top of the float, spinning around in a circle. It kept on turning, with both hands pressed to its head, until it finally toppled forward onto the float.

“Someone’s there!” Ambrose yelled across the flames. “Let me go! That’s ... That’s a human!”

Ambrose shook off his friends’ restraining hands and jumped onto the float. His tackle caused the burning float to collapse flatly onto the ground, crashing down so loudly that it echoed through the entire square. The red turnips were shriveling up one by one, releasing purplish red juices that stained the cobblestones of the square.

Someone ran to the well. He came back carrying a bucket full of water, and threw it over the burning figure as it contorted in pain.

While the fire sputtered out, the yellow figure writhed briefly, then slowed down until it was completely still.

“...It’s a person,” Ambrose muttered in a daze. “It’s soft. A human body. Not the papier-mâché I made. It turned ... into a human. Into a human!”

The other young men dragged away Ambrose against his shouts,

tearing him from the figure's side. He fell backward onto the cobblestones.

"It's a human.... It's a human.... Pull off the blanket. It's a person!"

Sergius slowly stepped forward. The villagers automatically moved out of his way.

With a trembling hand, he peeled away the yellow blanket clinging to the half-burnt body. The moment he pulled the cloth from the face, a shock wave strong enough to make everyone flinch spread through the square, accompanied by a faint, unspoken murmur of suspicions confirmed.

Lying there lifeless, eyes open, face frozen in a rictus of anguish...

It was Alain.

Kazuya instinctively covered Victorique's face with both hands so that she wouldn't see, but she roughly shoved him away.

Surprised and a little offended, Kazuya looked at her.

She was coolly scanning the square.

Kazuya too began to survey their surroundings.

For some reason, the first thing to jump out at him was Harminia's face. She looked startled enough, but a hint of a smile curled her lips. Ambrose was unsteady on his feet and needed his friends to prop him up. His face was contorted in shock. A grim-faced Sergius examined Alain's body. As for the villagers, they merely stared down at the corpse wordlessly.

Kazuya heard the sound of someone running from the direction of the manor. Since the footsteps were loud and thudding, he knew that it had to be Mildred. She ran up to them, her red hair bouncing. "I was watching from my balcony, and I thought I saw someone get set on fire...?"

Mildred walked toward the crowd of people, then noticed Alain lying on the ground. “Oh, no. This is awful!” she murmured tremulously.

Derek and Raoul arrived after her. When they saw Alain, both of them gasped. “What happened?” Derek asked, his voice shaking.

“I don’t know,” muttered Sergius.

Raoul was shivering in fear and couldn’t speak, but Derek raised his high-pitched voice in a scream. “Wh-what have you done?! Don’t think you’ll get away with this!”

“It was an accident,” Sergius said, in a tone that implied his words were not up for debate. He glowered at Derek’s face, which was reddened with outrage. “This imbecile changed places with the figure while no one was looking.”

“‘Imbecile’...”

“He must have been trying to disrupt the festival. Perhaps he didn’t know that it would be set on fire in the end.” Sergius looked down on Alain’s body disdainfully. “Foolish visitor!”

“That makes no sense!” Derek shot back, so enraged that he was shaking. His normally squeaky voice turned almost inside out, straining his throat. “That makes no sense! We knew all that! Just this morning, that man...” He pointed at Ambrose. “He told us all about the festival. And I know he mentioned it would be set on fire!”

Sergius shook his head. “He must have planned to jump out before the flames reached him so he could ruin everything.”

“That’s ridiculous!” shouted Derek. He scanned the faces of the villagers, but none of them were willing to meet his gaze. They seemed to wholly believe in Sergius’ words without any trace of doubt. Derek groaned in despair, and fell heavily upon the ground.

Then Ambrose spoke. His face was as white as a sheet, and his breathing was ragged. “Master Sergius... Even if this young fellow had planned it that way, it would be impossible.”

“What did you say?”

“Just a short time ago, when the maidens were throwing hazelnuts, this fellow passed through, then ran away; he seemed startled by the sting of the hazelnuts. He didn’t come back to the square after that, and there were many people watching....”

“What’s your point?”

“It’s impossible for him to have switched places with the figure. That’s why...” Ambrose shut his mouth, cowed by Sergius’ glaring eyes.

Agitation spread through the villagers. Their clouded gazes all turned to Sergius accusingly. Fuming, he fixed Ambrose with a fearsome scowl.

“Speak no more. A loose tongue is the sin of the foolish one. Or have you forgotten that!?”

“...M-my most humble ... apologies.” Ambrose shook his head helplessly, then stared at the ground.

“What the hell are you saying?!” Derek yelled.

As if disturbed by his cry, a flock of birds took flight from the square, vanishing into the mist. The violent flapping of their wings faded into the distance.

Silence overcame the square. No one had an answer to Derek’s plea.

monologue four

Serves

you

right.

That's what was running through my mind. I tried so hard not to let it show on my face. I had to concentrate on looking surprised, shocked, saddened.

Good thing no one noticed. I feared that they had.... But my worries seemed needless.

No, there was no way I could forgive them, not after hearing those voices last night. I have my own plans, after all. And they tried to get in my way.

As for the other one....

I'll just have to get rid of him.

They're not the ones who'll get to steal it and escape in the car.

Not them.

one

chapter five — a secret sleeps in the forest

[1]

The hooves of a horse-drawn carriage pounded up the thorn-covered slopes early the next morning after departing from the town of Horowitz at the base of the mountain, and arrived slightly past noon at a basin shaped like a drinking glass—the home of the nameless village.

The village had temporarily suspended the festival amidst an uproar over a traveler's sudden death. A crowd followed the headman into the dining room of the grey-colored manor, awaiting the rest of his deliberation. In the watchtower, the youthful guards caught sight of the carriage, and together they pulled down the drawbridge to receive the guests.

A stylish young guest, blond-haired and blue-eyed, wearing a shirt made of the finest silk and sparkling silver cufflinks, stood looking up at the drawbridge while striking an imperious pose.

He began to slowly cross the bridge.

The guards stared down at him from the watchtower, dumbfounded by the new visitor's unusual hairstyle—his golden hair swept forward and hardened into a point, as if a spiraling drill were attached to his head....

That man was Inspector Gréville de Blois, and in the grey manor, the object of his pursuit—his small, beautiful, and mysterious little sister, Victorique de Blois—had slipped away unnoticed in the clamor in order to sneak into the one room that she had been told not to enter.

A certain room at the end of a dark hallway on the first floor—

The study where a murder had taken place twenty years before.

two

[2]

The study was completely still.

It looked as though no one had gone inside for a very long time. The bookshelves and writing desk were covered in dust, and the sunlight that came in from the half-opened blue velvet curtains had scorched the hardwood floor, bleaching it in patches.

Victorique gently opened the door, and within a few footsteps, even her feet, as small and light as they were, had stirred up clouds of dust from the floor. She coughed softly, then stifled her breath, and carefully examined the room.

The study was cramped. There was a writing desk, a tall bookcase, and a large chair with curved legs. An iron candlestick sat on top of a chest. The desk, the chair, and indeed everything in the study was large and elegantly crafted in comparison to the confines of the room.

A display cabinet lined one of the walls, and arranged on the glass shelves were many antique weapons, the kind that medieval knights would have used. The crowded pile of weapons included a heavy spear made out of iron and a carved oak branch, and a long, thin sword.

Next to the cabinet was an even larger grandfather clock that someone must have been maintaining, as it still kept precise time. The pendulum slowly swayed beneath a dial that was old and nearly illegible, but Victorique somehow managed to make out the numbers.

She halted her gaze, narrowing her eyes at a single point on the floor. Her small lips parted. "This is where the body collapsed."

Victorique shifted her gaze ever so slightly. "And this is where those gold coins fell." She closed her eyes. "Why did all those coins fall to

the floor? There must be a reason for it. I'm sure of it. This is a fragment. A fragment of chaos. One of the pieces I need for reconstruction; it has to be. I must think. I must think!"

Her green eyes slowly opened.

She looked back at the door and muttered, "And then Cordelia came in. She opened the locked door. There was no one else in the study. It seems to have been twelve o'clock at night, but the exact time is unclear. And then Cordelia found the body. ...What about the window?"

Victorique ran to the window, kicking up dust in her wake. As she roughly threw open the window, more dust rose into the air like smoke. She looked outside, then shook her head.

There was nothing out there but a steep cliff, and far below it, the sound of rushing water....

"Not here," murmured Victorique. "There's no way to enter or exit from here. The killer must have left through the door. The study looked no different from usual. But a murder occurred here. And..."

Victorique gritted her small, pearly teeth, holding in her emotions.

And then she whispered quietly, "*Maman!*"

"...What are you doing?"

Suddenly, Victorique heard a soft, meek voice. She gasped and turned around.

Harminia was standing there. She had opened the door without making a sound, and now looked down reproachfully upon the small intruder.

Victorique pursed her lips tightly.

"Master Sergius said that you aren't allowed to come in here."

"Why is that?" Victorique snapped back.

“Why...” Harminia stiffly tilted her head in confusion. It was an unnatural position, like a broken doll that was moving on its own.

“Is there something here that I’m not supposed to find?”

“...What do you mean?”

“That there is another truth to that incident, hidden somewhere within this room.”

“Heavens, no!” Harminia laughed. Once she started to laugh, she couldn’t stop. *Hee, hee, hee!*

Victorique’s authoritative voice interrupted Harminia’s strange laughter. “Sergius is the type of man who doesn’t allow dissenting opinions. After he became the headman, I expect that no one was permitted to express any views contrary to his decision. And his spell is still in effect even now. However ... Is the fact that he forbade me to see this room proof that somewhere, deep down, he has doubts about his own conclusion? Perhaps there is something that he doesn’t want me to find out. Am I wrong?”

Harminia’s laughter was getting louder and louder. But then it gradually died down, and an uneasy expression began to appear little by little on her pale, ghostly face. Her eyes were bulging. Their pupils were black holes with nothing reflected in them, and countless red capillaries ran through the exposed scleras. As her head nervously jerked from side to side, she exhaled a great gust of air.

“What’s wrong, Harminia?”

Harminia sucked up another lungful of oxygen. “Actually, there’s something that’s been on my mind all this time. But I’ve never dared breathe a word of it to anyone.”

Victorique watched her intently.

Harminia slowly walked toward her with soundless footsteps, then said in a voice low enough to vibrate the air, “In those days, I too was in this manor. I can still remember how much of an uproar that incident caused that night. But I was only six years old at the time. I

lived in fear of the crime that Cordelia committed, and even when I was asked to wait upon her while she was delirious from fever, I refused. I was afraid. When the criminal was driven away with only a handful of belongings, I felt relief. And then I came down with a fever. That's just how much I feared Cordelia's—that sinner's presence."

Harminia paused. The whites of her eyes again popped out, their pupils rolling around in their centers. With such a queer visage, it was hard to pinpoint where her eyes were looking. She leaned down and brought her face close to Victorique's cheek.

"And yet, even after Cordelia was exiled, the misfortune she brought to this village never left. The village has been slowly changing over the past twenty years. It has lost its brightness before our eyes, like some dreary, colorless painting. There are much fewer children than before. And as for our newborns... Misfortune has never left our village. And so this dreadful thought went through my mind: what if. What if..."

Harminia let her words dangle in the air.

Victorique finished her words for her. "What if the sinner is still in this village?"

Harminia pressed her lips together tightly, at first saying nothing. "...What Master Sergius says makes perfect sense. For Cordelia to be the killer was the simplest explanation. The door to the study was locked from the inside, and only Master Théodore and Cordelia carried the key. There was no one else inside. Other than Cordelia, who entered the study herself, no one else could have stabbed Master Théodore with the knife. Of course, some things are still unexplained. The gold coins scattered on the floor, or the conflicting accounts of when it happened... Nevertheless, it doesn't change the fact that Cordelia is the one most likely to be the killer."

"Hmm..."

"However..." Then Harminia shouted, rolling her eyes about even more. "When I grew up, I realized something! There was something strange about this story! Master Théodore was stabbed like this ...

from behind, through his upper back. The dagger plunged into his back all the way to the hilt. But Master Théodore was an adult man, and Cordelia, the exile, was a girl of fifteen. Their heights were different. She would have to do something like this...”

Her face suddenly broke into a sunny smile. She brought her hands together and raised them high, then swung them down from top to bottom as hard as she could. For a single chilling instant, a ray of sunshine from the window glinted off the invisible dagger in her hand, just as it was about to pierce through the specter of a man who had died standing there twenty years before....

“...There’s no other way she could have killed him. But why would Cordelia deliberately go behind Master Théodore’s back to stab him? And if someone petite tried to do this, someone without much strength, then the dagger wouldn’t sink down all the way, would it?”

“That’s true.”

“If it were me, I would do it this way. Supposing I were to stab an adult man much bigger than me.” Harminia held the phantom dagger in front of her stomach and took a position where she would strike her opponent with her center of gravity. Then, with her eyes spinning and neck leaning all the way to the side, she looked down at Victorique. “Right?”

“I see.”

Harminia suddenly became very quiet.

“So who killed him?”

“I don’t know. I simply found it strange and nothing more.”

That was all Harminia had left to say, and she hurriedly departed the study, almost as if she were running away.

Victorique, now alone, watched Harminia leave.

Then she spoke to herself softly. “A dagger, wielded in a strange way. Gold coins, littered all over the floor. And conflicting times!”

She shook her head.

Tiny white specks of dust, set flying by two sets of footsteps, fluttered through the sunlight from the window. The only sound in the room was the steady, solid echo of the pendulum in the grandfather clock.

Then it made a slight click.

And began to chime.

Victorique's eyes opened wide. Startled, she pricked her ears. A blush spread across her cheeks, brightening her expression. She opened her small lips, about to say something. But at that moment...

Victorique heard the sound of flapping wings from outside the window. She looked up and shot a sharp glare outside, annoyed at her concentration being disturbed. A stream of white pigeons were streaming past the window, their small white bodies soaring through the dark sky.

Her face froze into a doll-like stillness.

She was thinking.

Her emerald green eyes flickered like a burning green flame—brimming with heat, but also with a strange chill....

They carefully narrowed.

She stood motionless for several seconds.

Until finally...

Victorique lifted her head. On her face was a cool expression, filled with determination. "The wellspring of wisdom has spoken. The fragments are now reconstructed!"

She slowly turned to the heavy door of the deserted study. "But..." A shadow suddenly passed over her face. "But how am I to prove it?"

three

[3]

Meanwhile, Kazuya was running around the town square, the cemetery, and everywhere in between, searching for Victorique who had become separated from him.

A day ago, they had been chased by wild wolves, had an unknown person slip an animal's eyeball into their water pitcher, saw a mysterious lump hide underneath a quilt in the neighboring room in an attempt to threaten them, and on top of all that, a gruesome murder had occurred just a short time ago.

These images kept running through Kazuya's mind, plunging him into anxiety.

He wandered around, asking villagers if they had seen the young girl who was with him, but they only shook their heads.

Kazuya sighed, then suddenly felt something poke the back of his skull—it was a strange sensation, like the tip of something sharp. When he turned around, a golden drill filled his field of vision. He instinctively shrank away, afraid of getting stabbed in the eye.

"You," said a man's voice, trembling with anger. "I believe your name was Kazuya Kujou?"

"...Inspector!?"

Inspector Gréville de Blois stood there, holding an enormous square travel suitcase. His face was twitching, and his hands were shaking violently. He seemed quite upset.

"That's quite a large suitcase you've got there."

"You..."

"I wonder if that's hereditary, too. Victorique's suitcase was also

awfully big....”

“You, you...” Several blue blood vessels bulged out on the inspector’s forehead. There was a pause, and then came an explosion of rage. “Why are you of all people here! And that, uh, that ... that *thing*! That long-haired, disobedient, runty...”

Almost overcome by the anger pouring out of the inspector’s body, Kazuya answered, “Let’s see, might you be referring to your little sister?”

All Kazuya could hear in response was ragged breathing out of the inspector’s nose. Rather than reply, he simply stamped his foot again and again in vexation. Then he finally said in a small voice, “That *thing* is here too, right?”

“Well...”

“Kujou, there’s no reason for you to come to this village by yourself.”

“Apparently, her mother was born here.”

The inspector groaned exasperatedly and shook his head. “Where is that thing?! Where is it!?”

“Well, you see, I’m looking for her myself.”

“How can you say that so casually!? You know full well that she needs special permission to leave the school. That means she’s hardly left the school at all, and before that, she never left the tower at our family home. If word got out that she was going places on her own free will, then I’d end up in very serious trouble!” He stamped the ground querulously.

“In serious trouble...? Inspector, why isn’t Victorique allowed to leave? I think anyone should be allowed to take a trip on holidays or go shopping on the weekends at the very least....”

The inspector pretended not to hear that.

Kazuya sighed. “Anyway, inspector... You chased Victorique all the

way over here, right? But it sure didn't take you long to find out where she was."

"Of course it didn't. For her to sneak away from St. Marguerite's School is an unprecedented event. In that case, there's only one place she would choose to head to, isn't there?"

"...I see."

While the two of them were arguing, a woman with curly red hair started to walk in their direction ... then hurriedly went back the other way.

Kazuya saw her. "Oh, I just remembered! For some reason, the suspect from that Dresden plate incident at the bazaar also came with us. That nun ... For someone who's a nun, she really likes to gamble and drink alcohol, and she said that she loves money more than anything. Anyhow, she's a strange one, that nun...."

The inspector once again pretended not to hear that.

Kazuya stopped talking, and stared closely at the inspector's face. *There's something strange going on....*

Now that he thought of it, the inspector was also behaving oddly during that time when Victorique solved the Dresden plate theft. Once he found out who the thief was, he left the library wearing a very perturbed look on his face, and didn't even catch the culprit in the end. And just now, when Mildred saw the inspector, she seemed to be running away from him....

While Kazuya contemplated this, the front door to the manor opened, and Victorique came striding resolutely outside. The inspector made a startled squawk, and grabbed Kazuya by the shoulders, shaking him. "Listen here! Tell that thing to return to school immediately! Got that?!"

"Why don't you tell her yourself?!"

Victorique heard the two of them arguing and looked up, but she appeared unsurprised.

Kazuya freed himself from the inspector and ran over to stand in front of her. "Where on earth have you been, Victorique? I was so worried. You've had me looking all over for you!" he cried out fretfully.

But Victorique ignored him, continuing to walk briskly ahead as if she had something on her mind.

When Kazuya tried speaking to her again, this time she seemed to finally take notice of him. "Oh, it's you."

"Of course it's me. And your big brother's here, too...."

"Ah, yes, Gréville. I was just thinking that it was about time for him to show up."

"Really? How did you know?"

Victorique raised her head to stare at Kazuya's face in surprise. "Did you really not notice?" she asked, profoundly baffled.

"Notice what?"

"That."

"That?"

"...Never mind," she said irritably, and started walking again.

Kazuya hastily caught up with her. "Anyway, how can you wander around by yourself after something so dreadful just happened? Victorique, I understand that you don't want to go home, but I'm begging you, could you at least not leave my sight?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm worried!" Kazuya shouted angrily.

At first, Victorique stared up at his face in dazed wonder, but then her expression gradually hardened. "I see no need for that."

"No need...? Victorique, I'm concerned about y—"

“Don’t waste your concern on me.”

Kazuya stared at her in shock.

“Just leave me alone. Why do you have to be such a busybody? Have you nothing better to do?”

“Excuse me?!” Kazuya’s face turned red with anger. His mouth flapped open and closed as if he wanted to retort, but then he heard the voice of someone calling out to them from afar.

They both looked back, and saw Ambrose at the front of the church, beckoning them.

Kazuya and Victorique turned to each other, silently agreeing to a truce, and headed toward the church.

A group of boys and girls near Ambrose’s age accompanied him. He looked haggard, but mustered his strength to cheerfully say, “Master Sergius decided that the festival would go on. That means...”

He went on to explain that on the evening of the summer festival, the children would gather in the church to have their fortunes told.

After the Summer Army had triumphed in the reenactment that afternoon, thus ensuring a good harvest, the church would be emptied later that evening. The ancestors would pass through the deserted church on their way to the town square, and at night, the villagers would put on a ritual display of the bounty of their soil for the perusal of the spirits.

But before these events, a ceremony would be held for each of the children to ask the ancestors, who were fast approaching, one question about the future. Sergius would act as the conduit for their words.

“Since you came all this way, why don’t the two of you take part? I’ll be assisting Master Sergius, so please go on ahead and line up.”

Victorique was uninterested, but Kazuya urged her to give it a try, and pulled her into the line.

Damp air filled the inside of the church. The ceiling was high, but the walls were narrow, and they tapered off even more as they reached the top. The stained glass windows shimmered, and sounds echoed inside, allowing even whispers to carry far.

The interior was submerged in darkness. The small flower-shaped openings in the rose windows split the pale sunlight into narrow beams, forming a constant flow of tiny white lights that spilled down to the floor like clusters of snowflakes dancing in the air.

On their side of the wide atrium, the pews had been arranged into five rows. Flowers were scattered on top of the stone pews, burying them in pink, orange, and cream-colored petals.

There was a small chapel at the very back of the church, like a secret room. But that room, covered by a pointed roof like a tiny house built inside of the church, was hidden in the pitch darkness, untouched by the radiance of either sunlight or flower petals.

A dim light glowed inside the chapel. It came from a small flame flickering on a candlestick, illuminating an antique vase that had been carefully placed at its side. Kazuya realized that this was the vase that had been dunked several times in the font of holy water.

Now that his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, he could make out the figures of Sergius and Ambrose sitting inside the chapel. Sergius' body was swathed in a toga that made him look like a monk. His purple sash draped past the hem of his robe and down to the floor. His eyes were closed, and he was thirstily gulping down glasses of water. Each time he emptied a glass, Ambrose refilled it from a pitcher.

The children took turns going inside the chapel at the back, where they would then whisper something to Sergius. With each of them, Sergius would close his eyes, take a few moments of prayerful silence, then whisper back.

Sometimes his words were surprisingly long, and sometimes they

were very brief. Some of the children left with satisfied smiles on their faces, but others were crying fearfully.

The atmosphere was quiet, almost solemn. In the beginning, Kazuya hadn't taken it seriously, but as he witnessed the reactions of the village boys and girls one after the other, he began to contemplate it more soberly. *So ... something about the future. What should I ask...?*

Finally, it was Kazuya and Victorique's turn. She pushed him forward. "You go first."

"Huh, me? F-fine..." He quietly walked up to Sergius. "Uh, let's see..."

Sergius closed his eyes. Kazuya quickly ran through the possibilities. *I guess I should ask whether I can become an accomplished adult who can serve my country, and by extension, the world, or something like that. Ask what the future holds in store...*

"...Actually, I have this friend." His mouth moved on its own, and began to utter something entirely different from what he had been thinking. And yet, once he began to speak, he found himself unable to stop.

"Well, she's a girl, and anyway, she's very smart and very sharp-tongued, and I guess you could say I have no idea what to do with her. I strongly believe that it's not my fault; it's only because she's so queer. She always makes a fool out of me and orders me around, and at the same time treats me like a nuisance."

"...Sounds tough."

"Yes. I've had nothing but one hardship after another; she really infuriates me."

"...I can see that."

"She really infuriates me so much that I just can't take it anymore."

"Mm-hmm..."

“So basically, what I’m trying to say is...”

“...Go on.”

“Can I, um...” Kazuya hesitated, then poured out what was in his heart without looking back. “Can I be with Victorique forever?”

His face reddened. And then suddenly, he felt an unbearable sadness, coupled with intense regret over having asked such a question. Indignation, hope, and some other emotion he couldn’t identify welled up in his chest. But he stubbornly pushed those feelings away. He suspected that there was nothing manly about such emotions.

Silence engulfed the dark chapel.

And then, somewhere in the shadows, he thought he saw something shining above Sergius, who sat with his eyes closed—something like a fragment of sunlight. It glittered just for an instant, then fell, vanishing like mist.

Then it seemed to get even darker than before. Kazuya bit his lip, waiting.

At last, Sergius murmured hoarsely, “You will not die together.”

Kazuya raised his head.

Sergius slowly opened his eyes. The pupils and irises had disappeared, leaving only the muddy yellow whites of his eyes gaping in his head. He opened his mouth and groaned aloud.

At first his voice was too soft to hear, but gradually Kazuya was able to piece the sounds into words.

“... It will come to pass... years from now... a wind great enough to shake the world shall blow.”

“Oh...”

“Your bodies are light. No matter how strong your desires, they cannot fight the wind.”

Kazuya was silent.

“That great wind will separate the two of you.”

He could feel the blood draining from his face.

“But fear not.”

“....”

“For your hearts shall never be apart.”

“Our ... hearts...?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Sergius’ eyes abruptly turned back to normal. He grabbed the water pitcher and drank directly from it. Thin rivulets of water flowed from his mouth to his chin, then down to his toga. “You may go now,” he murmured to Kazuya, then called Victorique next.

As Kazuya walked away, at his back he heard Sergius warn her, “Don’t ask about your mother.”

Kazuya ran out of the church, away from the raucous cries of the other children.

It was still a sunny afternoon.

He ran, almost twisting his ankle, and only stopped when he was finally outside.

Thick, milky white fog again hung thickly in the air. Kazuya stood there by himself, no sign of anyone else’s presence ahead or behind him.

Sergius’ voice echoed through his mind.

Your hearts ... shall never be apart....

That wind will separate the two of you....

A wind great enough to shake the world....

Years from now...

The wind...

Kazuya shook his head firmly. "I don't believe in it. I don't believe in fortune telling...."

It wasn't like him for his voice to tremble so anxiously. And he couldn't understand why he had asked such a question in the first place.

Kazuya dejectedly stared down at his shoes for a while, but then noticed a figure approaching from beyond the milky veil of mist, its footsteps making no sound. Before long, a small head with golden hair plaited into small braids assumed form out of the mist.

She stared wide-eyed at Kazuya.

It was Harminia.

"Uh, I just came for the fortune telling..." Kazuya explained briefly.

"Oh." Harminia nodded knowingly. Her voice sounded low and mannish. Then it suddenly turned high-pitched like a young girl. "Did you receive a bad outcome?"

Kazuya sighed. "Well ... yeah, I guess."

"The outcome always comes to pass."

"I don't particularly believe in things like fortune telling myself...."

"It always comes to pass," Harminia repeated, giggling.

As Kazuya stared at her, dumbfounded, Victorique came from behind him. Harminia eyed the two of them, then spoke, this time in a husky voice like an old person. "And yet there was one time it didn't...."

Leaving it at that, she departed, her form quickly disappearing back into the thick, foggy veil.

"What was that all about? To be or not to be. Victorique ... Ack!

What's wrong?" He paused his own grumbling to look down at her face beside him, and was shocked at what he saw.

Victorique was clearly in a state of deep displeasure judging by her swollen cheeks, which were as round as a squirrel's when gathering nuts. And her eyes brimmed with tears.

It looks like he told her something really bad....

They set off toward the manor. "What the heck did he tell you?" Kazuya asked her.

"What's it got to do with you?" Victorique replied belligerently. She was in as foul a mood as she had ever been.

Kazuya responded with considerable exasperation. "Well, nothing." But he knew that he wouldn't want to be asked what his question was either, and so he chose not to press her. *What if Victorique asked a really serious question that she can't tell anyone about.... In that case, I can't exactly force her to tell me....*

Then Victorique mumbled something in an exceedingly sullen voice. "...I asked if I'd grow."

"Grow what?"

"As in my height."

"...Your height!?" Kazuya stopped and looked down at her.

Her small head came up to his chest, and he was already considered short for a boy. For age fifteen, she was very petite. And this seemed to be a sore point with her.

Kazuya couldn't help bursting into a guffaw, even though he knew he was being impolite. "Ha, so you asked about your height..."

So that's what it was. For her fortune, she asked if she would get any taller, he added internally. He felt sorry for her, but then had to hold back his laughter again.

His earlier feelings of anger and hazy sadness disappeared, carefree,

into the ether. But Kazuya was never much given to endlessly worrying over things anyway—except when he felt truly hurt, such as the times he had conflicts with his father or brothers.

However, as Victorique stared up at Kazuya's sunny face, she wasn't in any mood to tolerate his carefree smile, and she glared at him with quiet, dangerous eyes. "Is that funny, Kujou?"

"Huh?"

Victorique's expression suddenly crumpled sadly. "You always do this. You don't understand me at all. And yet you talk so easily, like you think you know the first thing about me," she spat out cryptically.

These weren't the kind of words Kazuya was used to hearing from her. The tone of her voice had turned uncharacteristically plaintive, as if she was on the verge of crying. Startled, he opened his mouth to respond.

But a second later...

Victorique kicked his shin with the tip of her lace-up leather boot as roughly as she could. She hadn't used much force, but her tiny shoes were very hard, and Kazuya jumped up. "Ow!"

Victorique stared at him, a hint of tears in her eyes.

"Hey ... Victorique? That hurt. I'm telling you, that hurt! What'd you do that for?!"

She said nothing, and instead went on ahead through the entrance of the manor into the hallway....

Kazuya wanted to run after her, but Inspector de Blois had caught up to him and was calling out his name. Kazuya halted in his tracks, still thinking about Victorique.

"Hey, Kujou. So, is that, uh ... *thing* of mine going home yet? It's a problem if she's not at school. A problem for me. So I want her to

hear it from you—”

“No, Inspector...” Still feeling disconcerted, Kazuya stressed to the inspector that Victorique had no intention of going home, and that he was going to stay with her.

The inspector snorted contemptuously. “Kujou, what does you staying with her have to do with anything? I realize that you two are close, but the issue has nothing to do with your relationship.”

“What do you mean?”

Inspector de Blois looked down at Kazuya with narrowed eyes. “That thing is not allowed to go outside. Cordelia Gallo did something in the Great War that she should not have done. That thing is not an ordinary human being. It’s dangerous. You still don’t understand that, Kujou.”

The inspector’s expression was suffused with fear and loathing. Kazuya silently stared up at him. He wanted to ask him something, but he didn’t know where to begin. The fact that he didn’t know anything about Victorique was becoming acutely clear to him, and when he thought of this, sorrow and anger welled up inside of him.

Inspector de Blois continued. “At any rate, that thing must return to St. Marguerite’s School at once. Her enrollment in school was arranged based on that condition. Afterwards, I suppose ... father will decide.”

“By father, you mean the Marquis de Blois...?”

“Yes! And that thing, and I myself, will likely be reprimanded. Because I was the one in our family given the responsibility of managing it....”

Kazuya shook his head, unable to understand.

A human figure appeared out of the mist, approaching the quarreling pair. Kazuya turned around at the sound of loud footsteps; a moment later, the inspector did the same.

The person pushing his way through the heavy mist was Ambrose.

He had just sprinted from the church, and stopped when he noticed the two of them.

He looked like someone from the past who had lost his way in the depths of the mist, and only now reappeared in the present. The long-outdated style of his stiff, shaggy woolen shirt, leather vest, and knee-length culotte, along with the pointed wooden clogs that clattered against the ground as he walked, gave off the impression of the ghost of a medieval peasant who had materialized out of the fog.

But his face—accented by long blond hair, green eyes, cheeks as rosy as those of a young girl, and above all, an expression sparkling with lively curiosity—overflowed with that youthful charisma unique to boys on the cusp of manhood.

He smiled at Kazuya, then noticed the new guest, and greeted him politely. “I received word from the watchman, that a new ... guest ... had....”

Ambrose’s voice gradually trailed off, his shining eyes zeroing in on the drill-shaped form sitting atop Gréville’s aristocratically supercilious face.

A vestige of the innocent child still deep inside of him reemerged, and forgetting all about his position as assistant to the headman, he stared with naked curiosity at the new visitor. And then, in a very unadult way, he suddenly began to pelt him with questions. “Sir, is that hairstyle popular among young people? What is it supposed to symbolize? And your shirt ... It’s made of silk, isn’t it? Do men also wear silk shirts? And the shiny silvery things at your cuffs...? You have those instead of buttons. They’re very pretty.... Are they made from silver? Also...”

“...Ambrose!” A threatening voice boomed from the depths of the mist.

Ambrose snapped back to awareness and shut his mouth. Inspector de Blois was unfazed despite the onslaught of questions he had just been subjected to, and had just been about to give a discourse on his fashions, but was startled by the sight of an old man clad like a

medieval monk appearing from beyond the fog. He went quiet, and hid behind Kazuya's small form. "Who is that?" he whispered in his ear.

"That's the headman."

Sergius was shaking with anger, glowering hard enough at his young assistant that his beard nearly stood on end. Ambrose bit his lip in chagrin, and bowed his head deeply.

"Ambrose. Do you still have interest in such things? Even though you're the one who must protect this village as the next headman? And here I was, thinking that you had such promise."

"Sir..."

"Whenever visitors come from the outside world, you work yourself up into such a lather. It was the same when you were a child. When that descendant, Brian Roscoe, suddenly paid us a brief visit, and spent a vast fortune to bring electricity to the village, you clung to him too, and asked him for stories of the city all day long. What foolish curiosity. For months after Brian left, you would do nothing but go up the watchtower and gaze across the mountains. Am I to believe that you haven't changed a bit from that foolish child, even now that you've grown up into such a fine lad?"

"My most humble apologies..." Ambrose's head drooped more and more.

"Another thing, Ambrose... Your hair is undone. You must tie it back properly, lest your heart become as disorderly as your hair."

Ambrose's hand shot up to his hair. It didn't look very disheveled, but a couple strands of golden hair had come loose and dangled against his neck.

Sergius briefly scowled at the youngster as he retied his hair, then finally turned his gaze to the strange, flamboyant man hiding behind Kazuya. "And you are?"

Ambrose explained that a new visitor had arrived. When Kazuya added that he was Victorique's half-brother, Sergius' eyebrows

furrowed almost imperceptibly.

The inspector proudly introduced himself. “Gréville de Blois: famous inspector. But I jest.... Is something the matter?”

As soon as the inspector mentioned his profession, Sergius’ expression changed. “You’re an inspector...?”

“Yes. Uh, is there a problem?”

“If that’s so,” Sergius looked Inspector de Blois directly into his eyes. “Then I have a case that I’d like you to solve.”

four

[4]

The dining room on the first floor of the grey manor had a marble mantelpiece, gleaming black panels lining the walls, and glass lamps hanging in each corner. The walls were adorned with paintings that seemed to be based on scenery from the village.

And yet, despite the luxurious furnishings, the atmosphere felt just as oppressive as ever to Kazuya. The ceiling was low, giving him the feeling that if he were to sit very still, it would slowly creep downward until it crushed him. He sighed, and turned his gaze to Inspector de Blois, who was in the chair next to his.

Sergius had brought the two of them to this room without giving them the option to decline. One by one, old men who looked like village elders arrived and took their seats. Kazuya and Inspector de Blois shrank into their seats in the corner.

Harminia entered without making a single sound, holding old, but well-polished silverware. To each person she served tea, brandy, or wine.

Sergius turned to Inspector de Blois and explained to him what had happened just a few hours before, when the papier-mâché figure of the Winter Man had transformed into a human and burned to death. "...In other words, the deceased man, Alain, had been observed walking in a different location immediately prior to the incident. The girls had struck him with chestnuts, and he fled from their sting.... After that, Ambrose set fire to the float that was carrying the figure, but Alain had taken its place without anyone noticing, and he perished in the flames."

"Hmm." The inspector listened, while tapping his foot uneasily.

"That the police has now arrived makes matters very convenient for us. We wish for this mystery to not be left unsolved..."

“Hey.” The inspector poked Kazuya in the knee.

“...Yes?”

“Where is it?”

“If you mean your smart little sister Victorique, then she’s probably in her room.”

“Call her down for me.”

Annoyed, Kazuya whispered to him, “Are you just going to borrow her intelligence and take the credit again? Then you ought to ask for her help yourself. You never do anything the proper way.”

Inspector de Blois stared back at Kazuya with a puzzled expression, which for some reason slowly twisted into a bitter scowl. And then he spat out, “Absolutely not!”

“Why not?”

“My asking and your asking are not the same thing. The results would be completely different. Kujou, you may not realize this yourself, but the favors you receive from her are truly unusual and marvelous things, like constantly getting handed wads of cash by a rapacious loan shark, no strings attached.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“Just shut up and call her down! You’re the one who has to do it, Kujou; don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Inspector!”

But Kazuya did have to admit that he felt very anxious about leaving her by herself. And so he quietly rose from his seat and left the dining room, walking alone through a hallway which, while luxuriously crafted, felt far too suffocating on account of the low ceiling.

Kazuya climbed the grand staircase with its bronze railing, then knocked on Victorique’s door. The door opened right away, and she

grouchily peered up at him.

“What do you want?”

“I was feeling worried, so I came to check on you.”

“I’m fine. I’ve had enough of you. Leave me alone.”

“For God’s sake! ...Tch, fine. I’ll stop nagging you, then. By the way, your brother is asking for your help in the dining room.”

“For my help?” Victorique blinked her large eyes.

“The villagers are surrounding him and asking him to solve the case of the Winter Man, but he’s just sitting there with a blank expression and no idea what to do, so he pestered me into calling for you. He said I had to be the one to ask you.”

“A foolish man as usual.”

“Unfortunately, this time it’s your brother, not me. So what do you want to do?”

Victorique tilted her head slightly, looking contemplative. Then she nodded. “All right. Let’s go.” She scurried out of the room on her tiny feet.

Kazuya glanced at the doors to the other rooms. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Mildred seems to be in her room. She doesn’t appear to be very interested in the festival. The two men were making a racket in one of their rooms, but now they seem to have gone out. Apparently, instead of grieving their friend’s death, they would rather hold a grudge against the villagers. They seem to think that the villagers killed Alain in such a gruesome way because he insulted them.”

With this, Victorique set off down the hall. Kazuya hastily caught up with her.

As he walked behind her, he gazed absentmindedly at the fringed hem peeking out from her skirts, which billowed over her panniers,

as it swayed with every step. Her feet were very small in their lace-up leather shoes, making him wonder if they were in fact made for children. Victorique's tiny body, swelling with lace, panniers, and velvet, wobbled softly in time with her footsteps.

When the two of them returned to the dining room, for some reason, everyone except Inspector de Blois had stood up from their chairs. The large window was open, making the dark forest outside appear to be creeping into the room. The black tangled branches and densely growing leaves blocked all light from entering the dark forest.

Sergius was holding a shotgun.

Kazuya reacted in surprise. "What are you doing?!"

"Wolves," Sergius answered curtly.

Kazuya gazed deep into the woods where Sergius was glaring, but he could see nothing. Yesterday, when they had arrived in the village, Sergius had reacted to the slightest sound and shot into the forest, saying that wolves were nearby....

A crackling noise, like the snapping of a branch, echoed from the forest.

"I knew it!" Sergius muttered, and without a moment's hesitation, he shot into the forest.

The gunshot reverberated through the air.

Next to Kazuya, Victorique gasped, and a faintly murmured "No!" spilled from her lips. When he looked at her, she was gritting her small, pearly teeth. Then she ran toward the window, and interrupted Sergius just as he was about to shoot again. "Stop it!"

At the same time, they heard a groan from outside. Sergius lowered his shotgun. "A direct hit," he muttered.

"No! That's a human voice!"

Sergius simply stared at Victorique uncomprehendingly.

“Earlier, those two men ... they said they were going for a walk. Toward the forest!” Victorique cried out, then whirled around and dashed out of the dining room. At that moment, Ambrose happened to be in the hallway, and he turned back to shoot a startled look at her.

Kazuya and the rest of the group followed Victorique, rushing through the entrance toward the area of forest that was directly in front of the dining room window.

Victorique pushed through the black branches and into the woods. Her fine dress caught on the branches and became stained with dirt, soon rendering her unrecognizable from the way she looked before.

Kazuya desperately chased her.

From outside of the forest...

They heard a strange, faltering cry.

Ah, ah, ah...

It sounded like a human trying to choke back sobs, or the short whimpers of a wild animal.

Aah... aaah...

Unable to tell where the sound was coming from, Kazuya looked up at the sky. Thin black branches and large, overgrown leaves were rustling eerily in the wind, blocking his view.

Wolves roamed here....

Wild wolves roamed these woods....

“Victorique!” Kazuya clenched his jaw and chased after her.

That low, unsettling cry was coming closer behind him.

At last, Victorique came to a halt.

The cry became louder still, stabbing shrilly all the way into the sky.

“Victorique...?”

At the sound of Kazuya’s voice, Victorique slowly turned around. Her face was anguished. “That’s the second one, Kujou.”

“Huh?”

“Raoul has been killed.”

Kazuya ran toward Victorique. And then he looked at the ground where she was pointing.

There he saw Raoul, lying motionless, blood streaming from his chest. His eyes were wide open, staring blankly into space. It only took one look to tell that he was already dead.

The source of the weeping cry was Derek, who had run into the woods after Kazuya and Victorique. He stopped in front of them, sobbing in a strange, high-pitched way. When he saw Raoul on the ground, he cried even louder.

“We were taking a walk. Raoul was curious, so he went deeper into the forest. Then I heard a gunshot.... And Raoul’s voice. Just a brief shout ... more like a scream. I knew he’d been shot. But ... why? Why is he dead?! Why would someone shoot him?”

“He was mistaken for a wolf.”

Derek’s mouth dropped open, unable to grasp what he had just heard. “...A wolf?”

The villagers arrived. Once they saw the grisly scene, they fell silent.

“You saw the headman shooting into the woods yesterday, didn’t you? He heard a sound come from the forest, and thought it was a wolf,” Ambrose added in a soft voice. “The villagers never go into

the forest. So it never occurred to us that it could be a person...”

“What are you talking about? Can’t you see that he’s dead? That you shot and killed him? That could be me lying down there. Don’t you understand that?!” Derek raised his voice in an earsplitting shriek.

The villagers looked at each other, but said nothing.

Victorique suddenly crouched down. Kazuya watched her closely, wondering what she was doing.

She picked something up from the ground. When she noticed his gaze, she motioned with her eyes for him to come look, but he didn’t understand what she meant. She narrowed her eyes and nodded as if there was something only she knew.

What Victorique had picked up was...

...a hard hazelnut.

five

[5]

“Hazelnuts don’t grow in this forest, Kujou. That means there shouldn’t be any hazelnuts lying on the ground,” Victorique impatiently whispered as she began to walk out of the forest.

Kazuya jogged to catch up with her. “Then what does it mean?”

“The hazelnut was thrown at Alain.”

“Yeah...”

“By the way, where is Mildred the Dresden plate thief?”

Her abrupt change in topic caught him off guard. “I, I don’t know.... Isn’t she in her room?”

“Hmm...” Victorique suddenly yawned widely.

Despite the chaos that had taken hold of the village earlier, the villagers were proceeding with the festival. Ambrose spotted the two of them, then sighingly told them how Sergius was insisting that he had shot a wolf, not a person.

Victorique was silent for a while, gazing at Ambrose curiously. Finally, she asked him in a low voice, “What do *you* think?”

“Me...?” Ambrose opened his mouth, then closed it again, afraid to answer. He hesitated, and just when it seemed he would hold his tongue, the dam of his words broke all at once. “It’s difficult to say. No one saw Raoul die. If I were in Master Sergius’ position, I think I’d be asking myself if I killed someone. Because it’s also a fact that no one saw any wolves. I may strongly feel that there were, but I would still need to provide proof.”

He wavered for a moment, and then, gazing steadily at Victorique, said, “Whether someone’s committed a crime or not, you still need

proof.” His words seemed to be aimed not only at Sergius, but also Cordelia Gallo’s crime.

Victorique nodded quietly. “That’s right.”

A mutual sympathy had apparently formed between the two.

“By the way, Ambrose. Do you want the festival to end safely? And do you want to eliminate the source of all these evils?”

“Well, of course...?”

“Right now, this nameless village is mired in chaos. But I hold all the fragments of the cause of that chaos in the palm of my hand. If I reconstruct them, the mystery will be solved. In most cases, I’ll toy with them like this as a way to relieve my boredom, but there are vanishingly few individuals for whom I would ever feel like articulating an explanation of the process. It’s too much of a bother, you see. I liken it to adults being asked by children to explain some problem that’s far too complex for them. That would only be bothersome, so they would almost always choose not to. About the only person who can make me do that every time would be this Kujou right here.”

“...Really?” Kazuya answered, a little surprised.

Victorique turned her face away, ignoring him.

“So you’ll always explain it to me if I ask? But you normally don’t.... Oh!”

“Shut up, Kujou.” Victorique said, her voice low with displeasure.

Kazuya quickly shut his mouth. “S-sorry...”

“Um, so what are you trying to say?” Ambrose hesitantly interjected.

“I know who the culprit is.”

“What!?” Ambrose exclaimed. “Does that mean Master Sergius isn’t the one who...”

“...If I said he isn’t, what would you do?”

“But it’s a fact that he fired his shotgun at that moment....”

“He certainly did, but how do you know that Raoul died from that bullet?”

“W-well...” Ambrose sank into silence, his face suddenly turning expressionless. The look in his eyes was strange; the thoughts behind them unknowable. He glared fiercely at the ground, saying nothing.

“Ambrose, do you want me to articulate the reconstruction of chaos?”

“Uh...?”

Kazuya offered him an assist. “She’s asking if you want her to tell you who did it.”

“Oh... Yes, of course.” Ambrose’s voice was hard.

“Then I’ll need your cooperation.”

“Cooperation? With what?”

“I’ll find out who killed Alain and Raoul. In exchange, you will aid me in reconstructing the twenty-year-old fragments of chaos that I now hold.”

“By twenty-year-old, do you mean what happened to Master Théodore...?”

“Yes. There is another culprit. But in order to uncover that proof, I’ll need both of you to cooperate with me.”

“...Both of us?” repeated Kazuya, who had been listening absentmindedly.

“Ambrose and Kujou. The both of you.”

Kazuya and Ambrose looked at each other.

Victorique's eyes were gleaming coldly. In their depths, a green flame blazed. "There have been instances in the past when I've performed transactions using the reconstruction of chaos. In return for my solving the mystery, I demand appropriate compensation."

Kazuya suddenly remembered the first time he had met Victorique. As the price for telling him the truth behind the incident that he had been swept up into, she had demanded that he bring her exotic food. When he mentioned this, Victorique giggled.

"I don't even consider that compensation. Normally my demands are much larger, more painful sacrifices. That has been my habit since I was very young. I've always tried to make my demands as fiendish as possible. Just to relieve my boredom. And that's why, Kujou," she said, chuckling in remembrance. Her face looked very jovial. "Gréville may still ask for my help, but he detests having to do so."

"No wonder." Kazuya nodded, feeling like he understood a little bit more about their sibling relationship. Then, remembering the strange conversation he had earlier with the inspector, he said, "That reminds me, he mentioned something today about a rapacious loan shark."

"I can guess that was a reference to me."

"He looked angry."

Victorique gave a bored shrug.

The midsummer festival was in full swing that evening, and it was soon time for the villagers' ancestors to pass through the church on their way back.

The priests and the young watchmen filed out of the church and gathered in the square. With the church vacant, they waited for the ancestors to return from the land of the dead. After they had returned, the festival would enter its climax that night, featuring a display of their bountiful crops.

As the sky darkened, several large torches were placed in the square. They lit up the old cobblestones and the villagers in their medieval clothing even more brightly than the daytime sun.

Victorique, Kazuya, and Ambrose, along with a few youths that he had assembled from the village, hid themselves in the shadows of the petal-strewn pews in the church—during the time when it was supposed to be empty....

Kazuya stifled his breathing and crouched low to the ground next to Victorique and the others.

In the stillness of the church, they could distinctly hear the faraway crackling of the torches in the square. The air was damp and much cooler than the outside. A sickly-sweet scent rose up from the scattered flower petals.

The round beams of light filtering in from the rose windows turned into pale moonlight, making the church, which had been dark even in the daytime, feel increasingly dimmer and drearier. Orange light from the torches in the square penetrated the stained glass and shone faintly on the floor. Their eyes gradually adjusted to the low light, until at last they could make out each others' faces.

Victorique let out a tiny sneeze. Kazuya felt a sneeze of his own come on, but he choked it back. He whispered to her, "Hey... Why are we hiding here?"

"The killer is coming."

"What do you mean?"

"There's always someone inside the church, and they said the only time it's ever empty is right now, when their ancestors' spirits are passing through. If that's the case, then the culprit is sure to choose this time to steal something."

"Steal?" Ambrose whispered back. "What exactly? There's nothing worth stealing in this village...."

Victorique spoke stonily. "You may not know this, Ambrose. But some things are valuable precisely because they are old. Humans

are peculiar creatures who value objects for their rarity, even as they constantly seek novel stimuli to satisfy their unquenchable desires. Things that were made a long time ago are different from the things made today, and as time goes on, there are fewer and fewer of them. Thus, collectors will pay anything to acquire them. Now, Kujou, you recall the stolen Dresden plate.”

Kazuya nodded. He vividly remembered that plate sitting in the bazaar. It was so old that it seemed it could break at any moment, but it was also unusual in an almost bewitching way. When Mildred the salesgirl said how much it cost, it was shockingly expensive. And then she proudly added that it was because of its age.

“For the right person, this village is a treasure trove, full of old, valuable objects for which collectors would pay a fortune. The old chests in our rooms, the cracked statues of the Virgin Mary, even the old silverware in the dining rooms.... And then—” Victorique made a shushing sound.

The heavy wooden door to the church soundlessly opened, and someone slipped into the darkness. Soft footfalls echoed against the stone-tiled floor.

As the figure walked with hushed steps, its shadow loomed long and thin in the light of the torches in the square, stretching all the way to the ceiling of the stone-walled church. The silhouette, flickering malevolently, inched ever closer.

When it passed the pews where Kazuya and the others lay in wait, segmented rays of moonlight from the rose windows gleamed on the shadow’s face for just an instant.

On that pale face, smiling thinly...

Kazuya squinted, focusing his eyes upon the face of the culprit in the midst of the gloom....

“...It can’t be! Is that who did it?”

“Do you remember, Kujou?” Victorique whispered. “About that old vase that was plunged into the holy water.”

Kazuya thought for a moment, then nodded.

Mildred, blazing with anger, had told them about it the previous night.

The young men had gone into the church, looking for amusements, and for some inexplicable reason, they had taken an old vase cherished by the villagers and dropped it into a basin of holy water. All three of them did this, one after the other, and the villagers were enraged. Mildred said that they did it because they only chased after new things, and didn't know what true value was....

Victorique shook her head. "It's the other way around. Those three young men knew what value was more than anyone else. That's why they shouted and looked so reverent when they first entered this village and saw the church's old-fashioned steeple and rose windows. They were so enraptured that they practically began to pray. Those were their true feelings. Their boasts afterward about their wristwatches and radio, and insulting the village by calling it old-fashioned—those were all lies. The late Alain and Raoul, and Derek too, knew more about old things than anyone, and in their heart of hearts, trembled at the sight of a medieval midsummer festival still being celebrated in this village."

"Then why did they behave that way!?" Ambrose whispered harshly.

Instead of answering, Victorique swiftly raised one hand and pointed at the silhouette. "Because they were thieves."

Kazuya and the others exclaimed softly.

The person behind the shadow was stepping into the chapel at the back of the church. It reached out and cautiously groped for something, then held up an old vase with both hands.

"They dropped that vase into the holy water," Victorique murmured. "Of course they didn't do it as a joke; they were as serious as could be. They were searching for genuine antiques. They saw the announcement in the newspaper, and came all the way here, to the hidden village of the legendary grey wolves,

anticipating a windfall of valuable antiques. Dunking the vase was a test meant to see whether it would float in water. The real thing would sink to the bottom, but a gilded fake would float. The vase sank. It was the real thing. That's why...."

Victorique stood up, and called out to the silhouette. "Stop right there ... Derek."

The man's shoulders twitched.

Derek was clutching the old vase protectively to his chest, breathing raggedly. He glared at the tiny figure who had suddenly emerged from the shadows. His face was an icy mask, unrecognizable from the man who had earlier shed tears of grief over his dead friend.

Derek scowled at Victorique, then started to run. He passed the pews and headed toward the heavy wooden door. Kazuya jumped out, scattering the flower petals into the air, and tackled Derek, who was running headlong in his direction. Derek moved clumsily, trying to shield the vase from harm. He scowled at Kazuya threateningly, shook him off, and tried to run again. But Kazuya grabbed onto his leg and yanked hard. Derek slammed headfirst onto the stone tile floor, and groaned in pain.

Then Ambrose and the other village youths snapped out of their stunned states and jumped on Derek to restrain him, sending colorful flower petals whirling into the air. Several people pinned him down, cutting off all chance of escape. One of them ran off to call the rest of the villagers.

Derek was still clutching the old vase, unwilling to let anyone else take it from him. "This is mine. Mine. I found it. I ... I'll take it downhill to the town, in the car.... I'll take it with me. Me ... not Alain, not Raoul. Me...!" Derek muttered in his high voice, sniffing like a spoiled child.

Kazuya was staring down at him when he heard a soft, dry plop, and noticed that something had rolled off of Derek's clothing. He crouched down and picked it up.

...It was a hazelnut.

He showed it to Victorique, and she nodded in satisfaction. “Yes. It’s a hazelnut, Kujou. You know what that means, right?”

“...Nope, not in the least.” Kazuya shook his head.

six

[6]

The villagers gathered in the old stone church.

The small but strong young men of the village pinned down Derek, who had been captured. The others kept a short distance away from him, staring down at him with their unnervingly cloudy eyes.

The church was enveloped in cool, damp air, and from the rose windows, the moon hanging in the darkening sky rained down its pale light upon the stone floor.

Large torches were still burning in the emptied plaza, their crackling flames echoing in the distance.

Someone was approaching. The heavy wooden door creaked open, and Sergius entered the church, flanked by Ambrose. Sergius' footsteps rapped loudly against the stone tiles.

Then Inspector de Blois suddenly appeared, and strode toward Derek as if he himself had been the one to apprehend him. "Let's have a nice, long chat in the town downhill. I'm putting you under arrest. Now stand up."

"...Wait, inspector." Sergius said in his thin, hoarse, and yet unyielding voice.

The inspector turned around.

Sergius' profile was lit by the brilliant orange glow of the small torch that Ambrose carried in his hand. The flame's reflection flickered in his eyes. "I would like an explanation."

The inspector promptly stepped back, and tried to signal something to Kazuya. Kazuya threw an exasperated glance at him, then turned to Victorique.

Victorique was crouched down among the flower petals overflowing from the pews, cradling the old bronze vase that Derek had stolen, carefully inspecting it. She looked so much like a kitten amusing itself with a new toy that Kazuya and even Ambrose both hesitated slightly, reluctant to interrupt her. But Ambrose steeled himself and said, "Excuse me, Miss Victorique. You did promise to solve this case for us."

Victorique lifted her head, rustling her long blond hair, and looked over at Kazuya. "Kujou, explain the parts that you already know."

But a troubled look appeared on Kazuya's face, and he said nothing. Victorique looked up at him in surprise. "Kujou, you..."

"...Yes, yes. I'm nothing but a gifted half-wit. You articulate it, Victorique."

"Hmph..." Victorique finally let go of the vase and stood up. She stepped into the center of the circle of villagers and looked them over. They recoiled slightly, each one shrinking back half a step. Only three of them fearlessly stared back at her: Sergius, the headman; Ambrose, standing next to him, torch in hand; and the maid Harminia.

"Alain changed places with the papier-mâché Winter Man, and burned to death. And then Raoul was mistaken for a wild wolf in the forest, and was shot. Both of these incidents were orchestrated by Derek."

"But how...?" Ambrose murmured. "Just before the first incident, everyone saw Alain pass through the town square and run away after he was hit with hazelnuts. Right after that, the Summer Army and Winter Army had their battle, and when the Summer Army won, I personally set fire to the papier-mâché. There wouldn't be much time at all for him to make the switch."

"Alain changed places with the figure much earlier than that. It was in the morning, when the square was deserted. Ambrose, you gave us an outline of the festival at dawn. After that, the square was temporarily emptied of people. That's when Derek knocked Alain unconscious, wrapped him up in a blanket, and switched him with

the papier-mâché.”

“But...”

“The person we witnessed prior to the incident wasn’t Alain. We only saw him from a distance. Alain and Derek are of similar builds, and they also wore roughly the same clothing. Derek disguised himself in Alain’s characteristic beard, glasses, and hat to fool us into thinking that he had passed by.”

Derek lifted his head. “You have no proof.”

“Raoul is tall. It would be impossible for him to disguise himself as Alain. But you, Derek, have about the same build.”

“But...”

“And then...” Victorique uncupped her clenched hand to show Derek what she was holding.

...a hazelnut.

For a moment, Derek stared up at Victorique, not understanding her implication. Then at last rage, followed by something akin to despair, turned his pale face a deep red. “God ... damn it!”

“This just fell from your body a few minutes ago. If you hadn’t disguised yourself as Alain, then where and how would you have gotten this hazelnut stuck to your clothing?”

Derek had no answer.

Mildred, standing behind the villagers, leapt forward, her vibrant red curls swinging. She jumped onto Derek, and against his struggles, yanked down the cuff of his trousers.

Another hazelnut came tumbling out.

A foreboding silence enshrouded the dank and gloomy church. The bright light of the torches burning in the square streamed in through the stained glass windows, dyeing Victorique and the villagers’ faces an eerie orange.

The first one to break the silence was the tiny Victorique. “And in the forest where Raoul was shot and killed, there was also a hazelnut on the ground. Because you, Derek, were there.”

Sergius looked up. He shook his head uncomprehendingly.

“In other words, Derek lured Raoul into the forest in advance, and shot him to death. Meanwhile, at the festival, villagers were constantly cracking whips, pounding drums, and firing their guns into the air, and likely no one would have noticed the sound of a gunshot in the distance. And then he probably waited for the right time to throw a rock into the woods and make some noise ... perhaps when Sergius passed by the window and looked outside. Sergius was sure to assume that it was a wolf, and fire his gun into the forest. Then Derek would come running out and start yelling that Raoul was in the forest and that he had heard a scream.”

“If that’s so...” Sergius murmured. “Then the one who killed that visitor...”

“It wasn’t you, Sergius.”

“To think...” Sergius’ face contorted, hidden behind his golden beard. He silently looked up at the sky for a moment, then murmured in a soft voice that could barely be heard, “To think that I’d be saved by Cordelia’s daughter...”

Victorique didn’t respond. She simply looked up at Sergius’ face, clenching her jaw, as if holding back something that threatened to burst forth at any minute.

Ambrose timidly spoke. “But ... what could possibly have been the motive? According to what you’ve just said, those three visitors were thieves, but what occurred wasn’t just theft, but murder....”

“A rift must have opened up between them.”

Derek’s head had been bowed, but at Victorique’s words, he looked up. A peculiar smile distended his features. “That’s right....”

“Over dividing the spoils?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Not over a reason like that!” Derek snorted.

“Then what?”

“I know an object’s true value. So I steal things to keep them safe. I don’t lack for money. But in the end, money was all Alain and Raoul wanted. They used my wealth to commit their thefts, but they still betrayed me, and planned to steal the vase so they could get down the mountain before I could and escape in my car. I heard them discussing it. They did it in private in the middle of the night so I wouldn’t find out.... But even if I did get the vase, I never planned to sell it. I wanted to keep it safe in my home. But them, they wanted to sell it to a collector for a high price.... And I was in their way...” Derek glared into each of the villagers’ somber faces.

The burning torch crackled in Ambrose’s hand. The orange flame reflected onto Derek’s wrathful face, staining it a ghoulish red.

“It’s all your fault. All of you backward fools. You have no idea how much treasure is in your village. Hey, you maid over there. How can you eat off such exquisite medieval silverware? You priests share the blame, too. Leaving a vase lying around like that in your church; it’s unbelievable. Whether it’s a vase or silverware or anything, leaving something in the hands of a person who knows what it’s really worth, someone who’ll take care of it the way it deserves, that’s true happiness. That’s my happiness!”

“Perhaps being useful is an object’s happiness,” Ambrose said curtly.

“What would you know?!” Derek snapped, and then lowered his head and choked back a sob.

The villagers’ heavy silence filled the inside of the church. The rising humidity nipped coolly against their cheeks. The moonlight was becoming brighter, beginning to flood the stone tile floor in shapes that matched the pattern of the rose windows.

Finally, Sergius called out to the village youths, “Take him away! I’ll be the one to deal with him.” When Inspector de Blois tried to protest, he interrupted him in a loud voice. “We have our own laws here. As long as you are in this village, you shall abide by them.”

“But this village belongs to the kingdom of Sauvure. You can’t just ignore Sauvure’s laws and those who enforce them.”

“...This is Sauvure, you say?” Sergius turned his back to him and laughed loudly. His husky voice broke through the sparkling stained glass of the church’s high ceiling, reaching all the way to the starry sky above. Then he glowered at Inspector de Blois with his cloudy green eyes.

The inspector cringed fearfully away from him; he sensed something beyond what he could see with his eyes. What stood before him was not simply Sergius’ small form, but some other intangible something. This was the inhuman presence that was feared by the townspeople at the base of the mountain.

Sergius parted his sneering lips and slowly murmured, “This is no village.”

“...What?”

“You call this Sauvure? You know nothing at all. Good sir, this place is...”

The villagers and everyone else exited the church, leaving Sergius and Inspector de Blois by themselves. The inspector’s face looked even paler than usual under the pallid moonlight flowing in from the ceiling. The flower petals strewn on the stone tile floor had withered and lost their lively color, as if their life force had been sucked dry by that inhuman presence—by the Grey Wolf....

Sergius was still laughing.

A doubtful look crossed Inspector de Blois’ face. He stared steadily at Sergius, wondering if the man had gone mad.

But Sergius was clearly enjoying himself. He started to whisper softly to the inspector, then burst into laughter once again.

“This is Seyrune. The Kingdom of Seyrune. I’m not the headman—I’m the king. We were never the same people from the start. Even the likes of you should understand that, right?”

seven

[7]

The torches in the square blazed brightly and crackled savagely, pitching their flames high into the night sky. The villagers were running to and fro, busily making preparations for restarting the festival, putting on costumes and shouting back and forth to each other.

“...How’s the festival supposed to end again?” asked Mildred, her red curls swinging as she walked up to Kazuya with thundering footsteps.

Kazuya exchanged a look with Victorique. “Well... I think they’re supposed to display their prosperity to the spirits of the ancestors after they pass through the church....”

Harminia heard him say this, and came closer to explain the rest, in a low voice that seemed to rumble all the way from the very bowels of the earth. “The ancestors speak to us in words we don’t understand, in the language of the dead. There’s nothing we can hide from the spirits of the departed.”

“I-is that right.... And Ambrose was so excited about playing the role of a departed ancestor. He made that black mask....” *He was carrying that this morning, with the papier-mâché Winter Man*, Kazuya added silently to himself.

And then he thought of his own country, where the people also observed the return of the ancestral spirits on a certain day in summer, a custom that Ambrose had thoroughly questioned him about.

Ever since he had gone abroad, he had been standing frozen in front of a door in his heart. He had silently closed it when he left the country of his birth, and was very careful never to reopen it; that would make him feel too sad. But while participating in the midsummer festival of this strange medieval village, he felt himself

relaxing little by little, and now the door had unexpectedly creaked open. Taken unawares, Kazuya swallowed, and closed his eyes.

He was back at the scene of a cherished memory.

The cicadas were chirping....

The quiet song of the *higurashi* intermingled with their piercing cries.

Someone in his family had forgotten a fan on the veranda, and it shone brilliantly under the rays of the summer sun. From somewhere he could hear the soothing sound of water. It was his mother splashing water on the dry garden, the hem of her kimono hiked up demurely and a kerchief wrapped around her head....

He was lying down on the tatami, idly gazing out onto the sunlit garden, when a shadow in his mother's shape appeared on the floor of the veranda. He could hear her tiny footsteps and gentle laughter. The face of his beloved mother, framed by the intense summer sun, was too bright to see from the dark tatami room.

Oh, my, Kazuya-san. You must hurry up and get changed, or else your father will scold you.

For Kazuya, still very small, those words were enough to make him scramble to his feet. The next moment, the sliding door slammed open, and his father strode inside, neatly attired in *haori* and *hakama*. His two older brothers, also clad in ceremonial dress, came in after him. The three of them could have been triplets—they were big-boned, wide-shouldered, broad-chested, and strong, and always brimming with self-confidence.

His father looked down at Kazuya sitting absentmindedly on the tatami, and spoke to him in surprise.

Kazuya, what are you doing? Get ready to leave! Woman, it's your fault for not looking after him properly....

At his father's scolding voice, his mother standing on the veranda

smiled slightly, and whispered her apologies. Kazuya flinched, knowing that it was his own fault that his mother was getting scolded, and quickly fled into his room to change.

He ran into his older sister in the dark hallway. She was a lovely sight, dressed in her best kimono and holding a chrysanthemum bouquet. *Isn't it marvelous?* she said of her bright red kimono. Kazuya's breath was taken away by the sight of such gorgeous silk, and he mumbled a compliment. *Good boy*, she said, smiling. Then he heard his father's voice from the room, and he nervously dashed away to change.

That day, the ancestral spirits would return, and Kazuya's family would go out to visit the graves.

It was hot outside.

The higurashi sang softly, while the cicadas' cry was earsplittingly shrill.

With his father taking the lead, the family walked down the road to the temple. His brothers walked behind their father, and as his mother tugged him along by his right hand and his sister held onto his left, he tried desperately to keep up with the adults.

The backs of his father and brothers in front of him loomed all too large.

The grass and leaves of the trees on the side of the road reflected the sun's light in vivid green. Summers in that country were so very beautiful. Kazuya loved that time of year.

A hot wind gusted through, spinning his mother's white parasol.

His sister's glossy black hair fanned out in the wind and flew into Kazuya's eyes. Startled, he tripped on the stone steps. As he began to cry, his mother and sister laughingly helped him up. A sweet, quiet scent wafted from them. That was a woman's scent—so gentle, with an all-enveloping tenderness. He couldn't understand why his father or brothers didn't smell the same.

When they reached the temple, his father stood in front of the

graves and spoke of his ancestors, men who had been prominent generals and statesmen. Accompanied by his deep, sonorous voice, his sister passed the chrysanthemum bouquet into his mother's pale, breakably thin arms. She laid it down in front of the grave, then filled a ladle with water and let it spill over the tombstone. Her thin arms were always the ones to pour the water, and that beloved sight of her was enough to moisten his own heart....

His father was still speaking, and his brothers listened, their faces full of pride. Their ancestors were fine men, and their father was also a fine man. His brothers were well on their way to joining their father; their futures were assured. Kazuya tried his best to listen to his father's words, but they droned on so long that it became difficult, and had too many words that were unfamiliar to a child.

Then a summer butterfly came flying toward him. It was a dazzling, wispy golden color, with gossamer wings that filtered light like the sun through the trees. He reached out his hand, and it retreated away from him, only to stop invitingly a short distance away. Kazuya loved the color gold. The tiny butterfly soon flew away, but he thought dreamily of that golden butterfly for a long time afterward, and never told anyone about it.

Cicadas chirped in the distance....

Summers in that country were so very beautiful.

Kazuya opened his eyes.

He was still standing in the town square of the nameless village. None of the others had noticed him staring into space in a private reverie, taking a momentary journey into the land of memories.

It all felt so far away.

Even though it was just a few years before.

Perhaps the distance made it feel so long ago ... perhaps because the oceans separated them.

He glanced at his side, and saw the one who was now, to him, his little golden butterfly, Victorique, watching the hustle and bustle of the square with wide eyes. Next to her, Mildred was being unusually quiet, her eyes distant as if she was remembering something. No one said a word. It was a quiet time, an empty space.

They gazed at the lively square in silence, each with their own feelings hidden in their hearts.

Suddenly, Victorique thrust out her hand and yanked on Mildred's bright red, cotton candy-like curls.

"Ow! Wh-what's that for, you wee little thing!?"

"...So, Mildred."

"Wh-what?"

"How do you know Gréville?"

The color drained visibly from Mildred's freckled, ruddy cheeks. "Wh-what are you talking about?"

"Did he hire you? Or are you friends?"

Mildred's shoulders slumped in resignation.

Kazuya looked from one to the other, mystified.

"When did you find out, little one?"

"When you forced yourself onto the train."

"...From the very beginning?!"

"Hey, what's going on?" Kazuya broke in.

Victorique grumbled briefly in annoyance, but soon caved into Kazuya's gaze. "Kujou, are you saying you really did not notice?"

"Notice what?"

“That Mildred is Gréville’s lackey.”

“What?!”

“A man like you is... Now, listen, Mildred stole the Dresden plate at the bazaar—”

Mildred made a choking sound. “You knew that, too?”

“Of course. However, Gréville let her go. Why is that? He must have entered into a mutual pact with her for various reasons. And when I secretly slipped away from St. Marguerite’s School despite being forbidden to leave, she somehow caught wind of that and came along for the ride, no matter how long it was going to take. She even rode in a wildly swinging carriage despite suffering from a hangover. And then she tried to call someone on the telephone. That was because she had someone that she had to get in touch with.”

“So you’re saying...?”

“She was sent by Gréville to keep watch over me in this village. That’s why, even though he knew that she had stolen the plate, Gréville didn’t arrest her.”

“...I lost a poker game.” Mildred said grudgingly. “I hit on him in a village bar. I mean, he’s a noble. He wears fancy clothes. And he looked harebrained enough. So I thought he’d be an easy mark. But halfway through, my trick cards fell out of my sleeve. He’d been losing miserably until then, so he started whining about how he was going to arrest me. So I said I’d work for him, whatever he wanted. And he’s been treating me like a slave ever since, driving me absolutely crazy!”

“Miss Mildred, you were in the wrong from the very start for cheating.”

“I wanted the money!” For some reason, Mildred started yelling. She stamped the ground vehemently as if she were genuinely angry, jiggling her large bosom. Sensuality thick enough to smell radiated from her fleshy body and dribbled down to the ground like the rich,

sweet dew of a flower. “I just love money!”

Kazuya suddenly felt bowled over, and stared at her in confusion. *I wonder why she’s only ever this sexy when she’s talking about money...?*

“My family was as poor as church mice. Life was hard. We shed tears of bitterness while gnawing on potatoes,” Mildred lamented in an anguished voice, and pulled out a cotton handkerchief to dab away tears. But her face was completely dry. “My papa was an Irish immigrant who spent his days carrying around a whiskey bottle in a drunken stupor, and my mama... um, let’s see... ugh, I can’t quite seem to remember, but anyway...”

“Enough with the stories, please. Your crocodile tears, too.”

“Shut up! Anyway, that’s why whenever I see money, I get so excited that I can’t help drooling. I love, love, love money, so much that I can’t sleep at night! And who’d have thought that this village would be such a treasure trove....”

“You mustn’t steal anything. Sergius will punish you.”

“But I’m so poor,” Mildred stubbornly insisted, biting her lip. “I can steal if I want to!”

“You can’t!”

The two of them glared at each other for a moment. Kazuya showed no sign of budging.

Finally, Mildred said in defeat, “You’re such a serious fellow.”

“Ugh...” This happened to be a sore point with Kazuya, and he hung his head, deflated.

Mildred suddenly brightened up. “Fine. I’ll just discreetly return the plate to the church. It’s not like I would know where to sell something so expensive anyway. I just wrapped it in a sheet and hid it under my bed. ...If I do that, then can you look the other way on this one?”

“...Very well. As long as you return it as soon as possible.”

“You probably want some hush money, right?”

“Not at all.”

“Don’t be so uptight. I’m telling you, I’ll give you some! Such a boring man you are...”

“Wh-what did you—oh!” In the midst of his anger, Kazuya suddenly remembered the colorful wares that she had been selling at the bazaar. Before he had decided to buy the strange Indian-style hat, he had looked over a lot of other items together with his classmate Avril. A sparkling pretty ring, a lace collar, postcards, and also...

“...Um, in that case, there’s this one thing you were selling at the bazaar.”

“What? Which one? Just letting you know ahead of time, but I’m not giving you anything worth too much. You don’t love money, so you don’t have the right to take anything expensive from someone else.”

“What kind of logic is that?!” Kazuya sighed. And then he leaned over to Mildred’s ear and whispered to her.

A very curious expression appeared on Mildred’s face, dotted with freckles like tiny flowers. She gave Kazuya a long, hard look. “...Is that what you really want?”

“Yes!”

“For a serious kid, you’re pretty strange.”

Kazuya flushed.

“But I don’t dislike you. I definitely like you a lot better than that haughty empty suit of an inspector.” Mildred laughed merrily, her bright red curls bouncing.

Ambrose spotted the three of them from afar, and ran toward them, carrying a torch. He hesitated on where to set it down, then handed

it over to Harminia beside him.

The flame crackled and burned. Flecks of orange light scattered into the air.

“The ceremony welcoming the spirits of the ancestors is about to start.”

“Oh!” Kazuya nodded.

Victorique seemed to stir. Kazuya’s eyes searched Ambrose’s. Ambrose’s face was a little stiff, perhaps from nerves.

A night breeze rushed toward them. The wind buffeted the torch that Harminia gripped in her pale, dry hand, and it burned even more strongly. The flames shook from side to side, popping loudly.

The festival would soon reach its climax....

one

Every night—

I remember blood.

It may have happened long ago, but every night, I can still remember the bright color, the sound, the sensation.

That beautifully ornamented brass dagger, and the dull sound it made as it sank to the hilt.

And the setting sun burning like a flame outside the frosted glass window.

That moment when the thick blue velvet curtains fluttered, hit by a gust of wind... how dry was the sound.

The way he tumbled to the floor without a single cry, the tip of the blade jutting out of his chest, stained reddish brown! The faint sound of air leaking out from his throat, and then a silence that felt like death, a stillness impossible to defile! How I just stood there, even after the sunshine outside of window had been completely swallowed up by darkness! And after I came to, and returned to the place I was before, I slowly savored the pleasure all by myself!

As if it occurred only yesterday!

I can never forget it.

Maybe I'm trapped in its spell.

People call us “grey wolves,” but they’re wrong.

Wolves don’t kill their own kind. Not for a *reason like that*.

two

I stood quietly, holding the torch.

The midsummer festival was finally about to end. An unexpected visitor had once again, in the blink of an eye, solved some foolish murders committed by a fellow visitor, leading to the arrest of that foolish visitor—and I was smiling the whole time.

Fools shouldn't commit murder. They'll only be found out and judged in the end.

And I refuse to be judged.

I extended my free hand up to touch my face. I pulled down my lower eyelid with the pad of my index finger and scratched beneath the eyeball. As I scratched, I could hear the sticky sound that it made.

Whenever I feel stressed or angry, my eyes get itchy. Very, very itchy. It was the same back then. When I hid there, holding my breath, my eyes burned with such an itch that I wanted to cry out, but I gritted my teeth and endured it, even though I was a child. It would be over soon, soon, very soon.

At that time...

Yes, my thoughts always go back to that time. To memories of a murder.

Am I trapped in their spell?

The ancestors marched toward the square with torches in their hands. I heard the faint sound of their footsteps crunching on the gravel road. The villagers continued to make noise with drums, whips, and guns, jubilantly welcoming back the spirits of the dead. The whips cracked over and over again. The pounding drums were

deafening, vibrating the chilly air of the night sky.

The night sky was getting more stifling, as if a dark ceiling was dropping, pressing down on me. It was starting to feel like I was on a small stage rather than under the stars. The climax of the festival always felt that way. The echo of the drums shook the dark sky.

The line of ancestors, dancing gaily, was nearing the square. They wore clothes in gaudy colors of red and black, and hideous tunics made of straw. Those from the land of the dead look so different from us in the world of the living. Their clothes, their movements, their piercing voices, all of these made it hard to believe they were once humans just like us. Nevertheless, we still had to happily see them off, our distant ancestors, with a joyous midsummer festival.

They were coming closer.

At the head of the line was a man wearing a black mask. In contrast to the other men dancing joyfully behind him, stamping the ground and jumping into the air, the man in the black mask walked with jerky, strange movements. His arms swayed stiffly and his legs thudded forward on the ground, as if it had been a very long time since his limbs had last moved. His gait was unsteady, on the verge of falling down at any moment, but still he advanced, leading the line of dead.

Ambrose did a fine job of making the mask, and I felt pleased at this. To be able to march wearing a mask he had made himself must make him feel pleased, too. This important duty was given to him as a reward for being a capable headman's assistant. He must surely be proud.

The ancestors at last set foot inside the square.

We welcomed them with cheers and gunshots, and they marched even more joyously. The villagers joined the line of dancers, showing them the fruit of our harvest—ripe vegetables, casks of wine, and sumptuous fabrics.

I made no attempt to dance with them. I simply stood in a corner of the square, gazing out at the scenery.

No one knows that I killed someone.

Hee, hee, hee! Laughter overcame me. I couldn't contain my joy.

The din of the festival swelled through the square. Villagers danced, some carrying vegetables, some with fabrics, some with wine flasks. Shouts, rumbling drums, and cracking whips reverberated, drowning out my laughter. No one seemed to notice me.

Hee, hee, hee...

But then—

The man in the black mask suddenly stopped.

I was the only one who saw him.

I swallowed my laughter. An alarm began to sound inside of me, but I didn't know why. *Run away*, something seemed to whisper. My legs were frozen, rooting me to the ground. My heart began to pound.

I was getting a bad premonition.

For a long moment, the masked man crouched very still.

And then he moved jerkily, lifting his head.

Run away!

That alarm sounded again. But it was too late. I had already locked eyes with the masked man. I couldn't move.

Those large blank eyes carved into the mask, one higher and one lower—

They met my own, with a force so strong that it nearly rang aloud.

I screamed, but no sound came out.

The man in the mask said something. But the words were too far from my ears, and I couldn't hear them. Even so, as he spoke them, I could clearly hear the murmur of another voice inside of me.

It's too late. What you've done has been found out.... Harminia!

three

The square gradually quieted down.

The darkness grew heavier, and soon there was only an eerie silence filling the square. The starry sky suddenly seemed to lift, and the stars began to twinkle.

I stood there very still, a torch clutched in my hand.

The masked man continued mumbling something.

The villagers assembled in the square watched the two of us, holding their breath.

The flame of the torch popped.

The masked man's voice was getting louder.

But despite the loudness of his voice, I couldn't understand what he was saying...

I realized that this was what the dead sounded like. Those weren't words we knew from our world. That unearthly voice droned on, slowly and with unfamiliar intonation. Each time the man stumbled toward me in his queer gait, those words grew louder, and the mask he wore on his head, with its dark, blankly warped expression, swung wildly to and fro.

I looked around, and caught sight of Ambrose staring at me strangely. I too found it strange. If Ambrose was there, then he wasn't the man in the mask. So who on earth was that!?

For a split second, everything before me went black...

And then it came to me.

Who this dead person was.

There was a whisper in my ear.

That's right. It's the man you killed, Harminia!

My legs trembled.

Little by little, as if merging with the present world, I began to understand the masked man's words. He was already standing right in front of me. He hunched his back, stooping over, and groaned, "I found you.... The girl who killed me!"

I screamed. The voice that finally emerged from me sounded so peculiar, like an animal's howl. I shrank away from him.

"Harminia."

In a trembling voice, I called out the dead man's name. "...M-Master Théodore."

"You killed me!" the masked man shouted, in a voice shaking with anger. "You killed this proud man so easily with your youthful hands. And you dare live a carefree life for the past twenty years? Harminia... You foolish child!"

I fell back another step. "No. It wasn't me!"

"The gold coins fell to the floor."

I gasped.

The man laughed underneath his mask. "How they glittered as they fell. I remember it like yesterday, Harminia. Those coins, falling from the grandfather clock like stars.... Yes, I remember it so very well. It was my last memory, Harminia. O youthful murderer!"

"Y-you know about—"

...Only the dead could know about it. No one else besides me knew the reason those coins fell to the floor....

"Master Théodore!" I sobbed. "Don't do this. Please, go back to your world!"

"Will you confess, Harminia?"

"I'll confess. I'll confess. I..." I cried out, waving the torch. Fine embers from the flame danced into the night sky, raining down on me like orange powder. "...I killed you!"

The square was completely silent.

In the center, huge torches were crackling. A bone-chillingly cold wind blew, sending a flow of milky white mist between me and the dead man.

All of the villagers—and the visitors, too—stared at my face in shock. Fear and disgust began to mingle in their cloudy green eyes. They drew away from me.

"I had no choice," I moaned. In my heart, something murmured, *Is that really so...?* But by that time, I couldn't hear anything at all. I was all alone. Seized by terror, I yelled out, "But ... I was just a child!"

"So you killed him." All of a sudden, the masked man spoke with perfectly ordinary inflection. "You killed him after all. ...Just as you deduced, Victorique."

From the shadows of the great torches, that young girl appeared, walking up with tiny steps.

It was Cordelia's daughter. Her clear green eyes were wide open and staring straight at me.

I was dumbstruck. I strode up to the masked man, reached out, and ripped the mask from his face.

Behind the mask was one of the guests—the remorseful face of the Oriental boy.

There was nothing terrifying about him at all. He was small and slender, a completely ordinary boy with a face that seemed kind, and yet bore a trace of stubbornness. This wasn't the type of person to inspire fear in anyone.

His expression was apologetic, but he held his ground. He opened his mouth and said in a soft and reserved voice, “Miss Harminia, I put on a performance to see what you would say.”

“Then...”

“Victorique said that you were the one who killed Théodore.”

I took another look at Cordelia’s daughter.

Our eyes met.

A strong will was hidden in the girl’s eyes; she too held her ground. She stared unwaveringly back at me.

I was motionless.

Like oil catching flame, my eyeballs were suddenly seized with a burning itch.

one

chapter six—the golden butterfly

[1]

Kazuya took off the mask and hid behind Victorique, his face burning red with embarrassment. The villagers in the square, still holding casks of wine and brightly colored fabrics, turned nonplussed looks upon Kazuya and the others.

Dancing, making up voices... That was much too embarrassing. While Kazuya cringed to himself, Ambrose ran up to him. “Excuse me, but those unfamiliar words you were using, are those in fact...?”

“Yes, they’re in my native language. I don’t know much about what the dead speak, but I thought that if I spoke in a language that no one here recognized, then maybe it would have the right effect.”

“How many vowels does it have? Is it written from right to left? Oh, you write it vertically! Also...”

As usual, Ambrose began to pester Kazuya with questions. When Kazuya finally wrested himself away from him, he called out to Victorique. “Explain to them about the, um ... murder that Miss Harminia committed.”

Victorique nodded. An unreadable expression on her face, she looked down at Harminia, who was being held down. “A dove flew away.”

“...A dove?”

“I spent some time in the study where that incident occurred twenty years ago, thinking. Harminia came in, and I had a conversation with her. Later on, she left, and I thought some more. And then ... a white dove flew past the window.”

“Oh...”

“As soon as I saw that, the wellspring of wisdom spoke to me.” Victorique looked up at Kazuya with a queer smile. “You know, this chaos is structured the same way as the theft of the Dresden plate in the flea market. You understand, don’t you? Mildred released the doves from her skirts, and when everyone looked up into the air out of their surprise, she stole the plate. She needed the doves so that she could use a moving object to restrict everyone’s line of sight.”

“True... But what about it?”

“Just substitute gold coins for doves. It’s a very simple thing. Oh, to think it all came about just because of this,” murmured Victorique.

They went into the grey manor and entered the rear study—the stage for a twenty-year-old tragedy.

Victorique calmly began to speak. “At the time of the event, Harminia was a mere child, six years of age. In her own words when she spoke to me of this incident, she said something to this effect. ‘Wouldn’t it be difficult for Cordelia, a girl in her teens, to stab an adult man in the upper back from behind?’ Why would Harminia say such a thing? She was trying to insinuate that committing this crime would be even more impossible for herself, a child at the time, than for Cordelia.”

“But Harminia truly was a small child!” Sergius barked, interrupting her.

“Even for a child it’s still possible, depending on the method.”

“No, it’s impossible,” Sergius insisted forcefully. He started for the door without bothering to wait for her response.

Ambrose silently stopped him. “Master Sergius... All you have to do is listen.”

Sergius glared at him sternly. “Admonishing me? Foolish boy.”

“It’s just as he says, Sergius. All you have to do is listen to me, so just stay put,” Victorique whispered quietly.

Sergius looked back at her, barely containing his rage, but he no longer attempted to leave.

An ominous silence fell upon the study. The polished medieval weapons on the display shelves gleamed dully on the wall. Dust rested in white heaps on the writing desk and the bookshelves.

“There are several curious facets to this case. The first one is the fact that Théodore died in a locked study. Then there were the gold coins scattered on the floor. Furthermore, he was stabbed from behind with a dagger through his upper back. Lastly, the time.” Victorique looked up at Sergius’ stern face. “Sergius, you mentioned about the time. You said that you believed it was exactly twelve o’clock because you looked at your own pocket watch, and because you knew Cordelia to be a punctual girl.”

“Yes...”

“And yet... You also said that, for some reason, the people who were with you all gave conflicting testimonies about the time.”

“That’s right. But that—”

“Why did the people in the manor that night all have differing recollections of the time? Think about it.” Victorique looked around at her audience.

As the young men restrained Harminia, her lips curled into a slight smile.

Finally, Victorique pointed at the wall with her dainty finger. “This grandfather clock always chimes, but it didn’t chime that night, did it?”

In the room was a large grandfather clock. The numbers on the old and intricately ornamented dial had faded away, but the pendulum still moved in a precise rhythm.

Tick, tick, tick...

Sergius shouted, “You’re right!”

“That night, the clock didn’t chime. That means only Sergius, who checked his pocket watch, could be certain that the time was twelve o’clock, whereas the others thought differently. ...So why didn’t the clock chime?”

The gazes of the people surrounding Victorique were riveted to her small face.

“...Because Harminia was hiding inside of it.”

“What?” Sergius snorted in laughter.

Victorique ignored him, and went on with her explanation.

“Harminia sneaked into the study before Théodore entered, when it was still unlocked. And then she climbed into the grandfather clock and hid herself in the pendulum case. For a child’s small body, it can be done. Then, holding her breath, she waited for Théodore to enter the room. I suppose that the clock never chimed for that entire time. Eventually, Théodore came inside. It was at that point that the gold coins scattered on the floor made their debut.”

“What do you mean...?” Sergius’ earlier expression was gradually disappearing from his face, and his cheeks were turning pale.

“How on earth could a little girl hidden inside a grandfather clock kill Théodore?” Victorique continued. “Do you think a child could stab an adult man to death under her own power? It can’t be done. However, another way exists. It is possible if one depends not on the strength of one’s arm, but on one’s body weight, and the force of gravity. Young Harminia didn’t stab him from a standing position. She jumped down from her hiding place above the grandfather clock, murder weapon in hand.”

A chilling silence came over the room. All of those present swallowed hard, but dared not speak. They gingerly looked up at the grandfather clock, and then gazed at Harminia, who was quiet and expressionless. A faint smile shone abruptly on her face.

“The gold coins weren’t on the floor at the beginning. Harminia had them. And she sent them raining down. Sparkling coins, streaming down, weaving bright golden threads from the clock to the floor,

like a golden meteor shower. When Théodore saw them falling from up above, his eyes were immediately drawn to them. Even if he hadn't noticed them at first, he would have noticed sooner or later once he heard the sound of them hitting the carpet. Startled by the rain of gold, he would walk over, stopping directly underneath the clock—the location easiest for Harminia to jump down from. 'Use a moving object to restrict the line of sight.' Théodore's movements were restricted according to what he could see. And then Harminia would look down on him standing on the floor in front of her, and jump from the clock. The force of her body weight was enough to plunge the dagger down to the hilt. Théodore crumpled to the ground atop the gold coins, expiring without a single cry. Now I have explained two mysteries—the scattered coins, and the dagger lodged in his upper back. After Harminia had killed him, she locked the door and again hid in the clock, patiently waiting for someone to discover his body. That is why the study appeared to be empty."

Victorique's voice began to tremble slightly. "And the one who came in was Cordelia, the maid. She saw the body, screamed, and ran back out. Harminia then escaped through the door. That led to Cordelia being assumed as the only possible killer. Simply because of an inference that was far too hasty. ...Now, Sergius."

Sergius' shoulders twitched. Fatigue had caused his face to look much older over the space of a single day. But his gaze overflowed with the dangerous light of a stubborn old man, unyielding and admitting to nothing.

"Sergius, it's your responsibility. How will you make it up to Cordelia, who was driven out of the village despite being innocent?"

There was a long silence.

At last Sergius' shoulders trembled, and he spoke in a choked voice. "...I will use all the power vested in me as the leader of this people, and punish this woman." He glared at Harminia with a mixture of rage and contempt, and pointed his finger at her.

Harminia cried out, "No! I absolutely refuse to be exiled. I don't want to leave the village!"

Ambrose restrained Harminia as she tried to wrench herself away. “Even Miss Cordelia climbed down the mountain safely and lived on the outside. And Brian Roscoe lives in the outside world, too. If you search him out and ask for his help—”

“I hate Cordelia and Brian. I want to stay here!”

“But the outside world is such a wonderful place...” Ambrose murmured reflexively, then clamped his mouth shut.

As Harminia struggled, Victorique approached her. “Tell me ... what was your motive? What could possibly be the reason that a six year old child stabbed to death a headman revered by the entire village?”

“Take a guess,” Harminia said in a low voice.

“...The future?”

At this brief answer, Harminia’s eyes bulged out, and she shouted, “How did you know that!?”

“The only time I can think of a child and a headman crossing paths would be during the fortune telling at the midsummer festival. Some children may resent him for giving them inauspicious fortunes.”

Kazuya remembered the gloomy expression Victorique wore when she said that she wouldn’t grow any taller. There were also the mysterious words that Harminia had blurted out when they ran into each other at the exit to the church...

*The outcome always comes to pass.
And yet there was one time it didn’t...*

When was the one time it didn’t?

Victorique murmured, “One doesn’t have to put stock in a mere fortune telling. But Harminia, you possessed a strong faith in the laws of this village and the words of the headman. You had no choice but to believe in your fortune.”

“Yes... I had to believe it... But I couldn’t accept it!” Harminia muttered. “I asked something that I shouldn’t have. Out of childish curiosity, I asked for a terrible thing.”

“Which was?”

“When I would die.”

“...I see.”

Harminia stared back at the assembled villagers, tears in her eyes. “I was told that I would die twenty years from then, when I was twenty-six. Twenty-six...? I wanted to live longer. Much, much longer. So I had to kill the one who had told me this fortune, Master Théodore, in order to undo it!”

His voice trembling, Sergius shouted, “That’s why?! That’s why you killed such a great elder?! An insignificant child like you?!”

“You would never understand unless it happened to you! That despair, that anger, that sorrow!”

They glared at each other. Harminia’s eyes bulged outward, looking as if they would burst and spill down to the floor. As for Sergius, his eyes were bloodshot, and his fists quivered with rage.

The look on Sergius’ face now began to resemble that of a religious fanatic, his eyes rolling toward each other bizarrely, making it hard to tell where they were looking. He pointed at Harminia with his shaking finger, then shouted in a booming voice, “Ambrose, cut off her head!”

“...Huh?” Ambrose’s mouth dropped open.

Sergius continued loudly, “Cutting off the heads of criminals was once our custom. Eventually there were fewer villagers who committed grave crimes, and the practice was abandoned.... But when I was your age, I had the duty of beheading criminals.”

Inspector de Blois, who been listening near the back of the crowd, hastily stepped forward. “Um, Mr. Sergius, allow me to state this again, but I am arresting Derek and taking him to the police station.

And the statute of limitations has already run out on this girl's crime. If you have this young lad behead her, then he'll be the next one charged with murder by the Sauvure police. And if the villagers turn a blind eye, they'll be charged with aiding and abetting—"

"This isn't Sauvure!"

"...No, you can't just make up a funny name and call it your own country."

"Get out!" Sergius gave an order to the young men, and they obeyed, lifting up Inspector de Blois and carrying him down the hallway. His shouts faded away, and in the distance, they could hear him yelling faintly, "Kujou, do something!"

In a voice that nearly shook the walls, Sergius thundered, "It was enough to punish Cordelia with exile because her crime was never proven. Harminia, you will lose your head, and it will be buried separately from your body. You will never return on midsummer festival nights. Sinners shall never reappear in front of the descendants. Ambrose!"

"M-Master Sergius..." Ambrose was trembling violently. His face, beautiful enough to be a lady's had he been born female, was pale and waxen.

Sergius removed a large axe from the display shelves and threw it at him. Ambrose caught it automatically, then screamed and flung it away. The axe hit the floor, stirring up white particles of dust.

Sergius' swollen red eyes glowered at his young assistant. "Do it. If you are going to inherit this village, then you shall not suffer a sinner!"

"But ... she was only a child. It's already been twenty years. And, and..."

"Ambrose!"

"I, I... When I was a child, Harminia often played with me. She may have been a little eccentric, but she was gentle, like an older sister to me. Even if she killed Master Théodore, she's still a kind person

as far as I'm concerned. I won't do it. Master Sergius!"

"That is the law of this land. Harminia will die at the age of twenty-six, just as Master Théodore foretold."

Confronted by Sergius' glare, the will to resist drained out of Ambrose. He slowly picked up the axe with his thin, shaking arms. His teeth chattered audibly from fright. Tears dripped down his pale cheeks like flower petals from his large, clear eyes. His slender shoulders shook violently.

He turned to Kazuya for support. Kazuya was also shaking.

"Good sir... Out there, in the outside world, what would happen in this kind of situation?"

Kazuya replied tremulously, "The police would arrest her. And then ... they do an investigation... Victorique?"

Victorique parted her lips. "They hold a trial."

"A ... trial?"

"Yes. Harminia and the police would each have someone represent them, and they talk to each other. And then they decide whether or not a crime was committed. Depending on the severity, one could be sentenced to death, or sent to prison, or even be released. For a crime committed by a child, the death penalty would be unlikely."

The axe fell from Ambrose's hand. His face looked very forlorn, but also powerfully determined. Lips taut, he lifted his head sorrowfully. He stared at Sergius, who smoldered in rage, and addressed him haltingly. "I've always respected you, Master Sergius. And I also loved this village. I was born here, and you acknowledged me, a child who had nothing. But ... there's more to the world than that.... And so, well... Harminia, run!"

Ambrose suddenly shoved away the young men who were restraining Harminia. In the midst of their shouts of surprise and protest, Harminia lurched into motion like an inhuman creature, jumping through the air and grabbing hold of a long spear that was displayed on the wall.

She turned around. With her eyeballs popping out, she parted her bloodless lips and murmured something.

Then she dodged her captors and fled like a panicked rabbit.

two

Ambrose stood frozen, stunned at what he had just done. The rest of the small, cloudy-eyed youths began to castigate him all at once, surrounding him like the seven dwarfs around Snow White. A moment later, they left their leader's side, and ran out into the hallway, calling Harminia's name.

Sergius screamed curses, and raised a trembling fist at Ambrose. "Ambrose ... my foolish successor. Catch her quickly. And cut off her head. There is no other way for you to find my forgiveness!"

"No matter what you say to me, Master Sergius, I won't kill a human being," Ambrose replied shakily.

"You don't know what you've done. Because you allowed Harminia to escape, she will surely bring calamity upon this village. Perhaps it has already begun. Go, and kill her! All you have to do is trust me and do as I say. Asking how I know or why I give the order is simply foolishness. Young man, engrave that on your very soul!"

Ambrose bowed his head, but no longer nodded sadly as he normally did. He shook his head and silently headed for the door.

At the same time, they heard shouting from the young men down the hallway.

Kazuya and Ambrose exchanged a look, then dashed toward the door.

An enormous writhing animal's tongue, red and thick, was coming straight toward them.

It was fire.

The heavy blue velvet curtains hanging over the windows of the hallway were aflame, crumbling, shuddering to the floor like the last gasps of a dying creature. The flames spread to the grey carpet, then advanced toward Kazuya and Ambrose with renewed vigor.

“Fire! Harminia started a fire!” cried the young men, running back.

Kazuya cast his eyes beyond the writhing tongues of fire, and saw a woman holding a torch in her hand—it was Harminia, her eyes agape, and her head bent to the side as if about to thud to the floor, like a broken doll....

The youths ran the opposite direction down the hall. “Take the back door! The fire hasn’t spread there yet!”

Kazuya collected himself and ran back inside the study. Mildred and Inspector de Blois had also heard the shouts, and they quickly rushed out. Kazuya pushed against the flow of people to leap inside the study, where he found Victorique standing alone in the middle of the room. He grabbed her hand. “Victorique, there’s a fire! Run!”

Behind him came Ambrose, who jumped back into the study and ran to Sergius. He snatched away the old man’s cane and lifted him onto his back, then followed Kazuya and Victorique as they escaped through the hallway.

White smoke filled the air, stinging their eyes. Kazuya held Victorique close to him. “Close your eyes!” he urged her. Ignoring his own pain, he started to run.

When he happened to look down beside him, Victorique’s eyes were screwed shut and she was running for dear life, just as he had told her to do. She couldn’t run very fast. Ambrose, carrying Sergius on his back, soon overtook them. Nevertheless, she continued running ahead fearlessly, eyes closed, relying only on the grip of Kazuya’s hand. Her hand squeezed his own more and more tightly.

At last, they tumbled out of the modest back entrance. As he coughed from the smoke, Kazuya looked up at the manor.

It was burning.

The fire crackled toward the night sky, spreading higher and higher up.

The manor had looked so much like an enormous grey wolf the first time he saw it, but now it stooped low to the ground, motionless,

fully engulfed in flames.

“Harminia!” Kazuya heard Sergius murmur in a bone-chilling voice. He was kneeling down on the hard ground and looking up at the night sky, anger coloring his face dark red. An aura of deep, concentrated wrath emanated from him.

After delivering him to safety, Ambrose vanished from sight, and Sergius was alone.

“Harminia! Killing Master Théodore wasn’t enough for you? You even set fire to the village!”

Victorique opened her eyes and let out a little cry. Kazuya followed her gaze, and then he saw it ... the nameless village was burning.

The roofs, the trees, and everything surrounding them were catching ablaze with flickering flames. The stone walls turned an eerie red as they absorbed the heat. The straw of the thatched roofs sputtered embers toward the night sky. Fire topped the houses like fiery headdresses, making the entire village glitter like a gigantic chandelier. Every structure danced in red.

The villagers gathered in the town square. They drew water from the well and threw it onto the flames.

Ambrose was nowhere to be seen.

Then some of the young men started to shout something from the far end of the square. Before long, Ambrose came running from the center of the circle of youths, his long golden hair flying free, streaming over his shoulders. He spotted Kazuya’s group and yelled to them, his face pulled taut with horror. “It’s Harminia, she’s...!”

Kazuya and the others started to run. They left the square behind them and rushed through the cobblestone streets, slipping between filaments of the fiery chandelier, until reaching the entrance of the village, where Ambrose was pointing with his trembling finger.

He was pointing at the drawbridge—the village’s sole link to the outside world.

The drawbridge had been lowered.

Ambrose then turned to point at the top of the stone watchtower, where a young lookout would drop the drawbridge whenever visitors came. It formed a single point of black twilight in the village aglow with flame.

A figure was hidden at the top of the dark tower.

Dark blue, medieval-looking clothing. Blond hair plaited into thin braids. Bulging, deep green eyes.

Harminia.

Kazuya and the others looked up at her, and she slowly lowered her head to look back down on them, eyes open wide.

Harminia lifted up the burning torch in her hand. The fire hissed and crackled. Her other hand gripped a spear. She stood erect, looking surreally like an ancient warrior.

Several seconds passed.

And then...

She smiled. The whites of her eyes were bared, and her mouth was open so widely that the corners of her mouth seemed to nearly split. It was the first time that Kazuya had seen her smile like this.

Harminia crouched down low. A moment later, her shrunken, hunched body elongated what seemed like several times longer as she propelled herself into the air with her collected energy. She descended gracefully, landing on top of the cobblestones with a hard slap, then glowered at the onlookers.

Kazuya couldn't tell where she was looking at with her popping eyes. He positioned Victorique safely behind him.

"You went too far," Harminia growled, and lifted her spear.

Trembling, Kazuya stood in front of Victorique. Ambrose stared in shock at the three of them.

Kazuya glared at Harminia. “No, she didn’t. Miss Harminia, all Victorique did was clear her mother’s name! Because twenty years ago, you let an innocent person—”

“But I say you went too far,” Harminia repeated. Her head lurched to the side, and she looked down on Victorique with a smile. The smile suddenly disappeared as if sucked into a void. “Cordelia’s daughter ... this is the place where you die!”

Kazuya gasped and moved to shield Victorique from Harminia and her spear. But Harminia didn’t attack.

She turned and ran straight for the drawbridge.

Harminia was far away in a flash. Kazuya could see the soles of her shoes—black soles on black leather. A foreboding color.

Ambrose suddenly screamed, apparently realizing what she was trying to do. “Stop it, Harminia!”

“...This way, you won’t catch me!”

“Harminia!?”

After crossing the bridge, Harminia turned around. She slowly lowered the torch in her hand.

More villagers started to arrive. Harminia stood alone at the other end of the bridge. Villagers and visitors alike stared at her speechlessly.

Ambrose cried out, “Harminia ... She’s trying to burn down the bridge!”

Kazuya gasped.

Harminia threw the torch at the center of the bridge. The flames fluttered, and soon slowly began to spread.

Sergius came closer, propped up by the villagers. Ambrose turned to him and tried to speak, but Sergius stopped him. “Ambrose, your hair is untied.”

“Huh...?” Ambrose stared at him, caught off guard.

Sergius snapped, “How many times do I have to tell you to tie it up properly? Fix your hair this instant.”

“But Master Sergius... the bridge!”

“It makes no difference if we have a bridge or not. All we need is this village. There is no need for us to go outside.”

Ambrose gave a short groan. No more did he hang his head the way he used to whenever Sergius scolded him. He simply returned Sergius’ gaze unflinchingly.

The fire was spreading across the bridge.

The bridge was about wide enough for one carriage to pass. The thick ropes strung along the sides were burning, and the bridge supports were slackening and beginning to sway up and down. Bit by bit, the wooden planks turned a charred black.

Kazuya shouted, “Victorique, hurry! We have to get across!” He tugged onto her hand.

Victorique stared up fearfully into his eyes. “But...”

“If the bridge collapses, we won’t be able to go home!”

“But across the bridge...”

Kazuya spoke to her sternly. “If you’re scared, then close your eyes. Understand?”

Rather than wait for a response, Kazuya began running. Victorique followed along without resistance. He looked down at her, and just as she had when she ran through the hallway of the manor, her eyes were closed as tightly as could be, and her little nose was cutely crumpled.

Seeing this filled Kazuya with relief. He looked over his shoulder and yelled, "Inspector! Miss Mildred!"

Every face was pale in terror.

The trembling visitors began to traverse the burning bridge.

The bridge was swaying.

Crackling and smoldering.

Kazuya glanced down.

In the dark, he couldn't see the bottom of the distant abyss; all he saw was a deep blackness. He heard something that sounded like water rushing below.

Everyone else was so afraid that their knees were knocking, but somehow, Kazuya managed to calmly walk across. As he looked back at the fear-stricken faces of Inspector de Blois and Mildred, he found the contrast strange at first, but then realized why.

That's right! I'm used to this sort of thing. I'm always climbing that maze of stairs in St. Marguerite's Library.... And I do remember that it was pretty scary until I adjusted to it....

When they made it halfway across the bridge, they heard a voice like the howling of a beast up ahead. Victorique shuddered and clung to Kazuya. He felt her small body trembling underneath her layers and layers of frills, and wrapped both arms around her protectively.

He looked up, and saw a sharp metal point rushing at him.

It was Harminia, wielding a spear. She was making a strange shout and running toward him. The drawbridge, on the verge of crumbling, swayed violently with each of her footfalls.

Harminia was heading straight toward Kazuya ... no, toward Victorique.

The inspector, escorting Derek and Mildred, swiftly ran past them.

The tip of the spear was ominously darkened. Beyond the approaching speartip, he saw Harminia's face wearing a deranged smile. Her head rolled wildly from side to side, as if it was about to fly off into the ravine. Kazuya backed away from her, cradling Victorique's small body. The burning bridge lurched. Flames from the heavy rope next to him licked his cheek.

The spear grazed Kazuya's right arm. He felt a sensation of heat. When he looked at his arm, a long, shallow cut was on his sleeve, and blood was beginning to seep out. He looked down within his arms; Victorique's eyes were still tightly shut.

Kazuya suddenly understood just how frightening it was to run with one's eyes closed. He had told Victorique to close her eyes and follow him, but in a situation where she couldn't see her surroundings, even walking slowly would be scary enough, much less running.

And yet Victorique did what he had told her and kept her eyes closed, while never letting go of his hand.

Was it because she believed in his strength?

If that were really so, then it would be the first time Kazuya had ever experienced such a thing. Who else besides Victorique? His father and brothers had high hopes for him, his mother and sister doted on him, but until now, no one had ever believed in his strength enough to entrust something important to him.

I have to do whatever it takes to save Victorique, Kazuya told himself fiercely.

Harminia slashed her spear at him.

Each time she did, Kazuya dodged to the right and to the left, keeping Victorique behind himself.

Sergius' chilling words repeated themselves in his heart.

At that fortune telling...

In the future that Sergius had foretold for him....

*Years from now ... a wind great enough to shake the world shall blow.
That great wind will separate you.
No matter how strong your desires, they cannot fight the wind.
But your hearts...
...shall never be apart.*

Kazuya swallowed heavily. *It's just fortune telling. It can't possibly come true. These people still live like they're in the Middle Ages; they wouldn't have any understanding of the world, or any inkling of a wind that can shake the world... But what if... what if....*

Undaunted by Harminia's gaze, Kazuya glared back at her bulging eyes.

If it really were true, then the time still hasn't come yet for us to be separated. We'll go home safely, to St. Marguerite's School... the place we belong...

The spear lunged straight at Kazuya and Victorique.

Kazuya pushed Victorique away and fell back one step. The spear pierced through empty space. Kazuya gulped, realizing that he and Victorique were now apart.

Harminia also realized it. She stood on top of the burning bridge and grinned. Her eyes were stained red with burst vessels. "You first... I'll start with you!"

She swung her spear at Kazuya.

The bridge was steadily becoming engulfed in flames.

Harminia anticipated that Kazuya would try to escape, and thrust her spear with all her might toward his left—a safer place for him to move, away from the flames.

But Kazuya immediately moved toward the opposite direction—his right, where Victorique had been left by herself. Harminia turned around and stared uncomprehendingly at Kazuya, standing in front of Victorique. *Why is he over there?* her expression seemed to ask.

Harminia lost her balance. She had put too much of her body weight into trying to stab Kazuya, and the spear plunged into thin air.

She stumbled, then fell from the bridge, plummeting to the bottom of the abyss.

Kazuya heard a harrowing scream that he was sure he would never forget no matter how many years passed. It faded away, and at last disappeared, swallowed up by the depths.

Night had fallen and it was hard to see, but Kazuya knew there was a raging stream flowing at the distant bottom of the deep ravine. A chill ran down his spine.

A crackling came from the bridge as it threatened to fall. Now there was only a thin path in the middle left for them to walk through. The flames on both sides of the bridge intensified, looming close to Kazuya and Victorique like walls of fire.

Kazuya pushed away his thoughts and tugged on Victorique's hand to prompt her to run. He sailed through the last ten steps, holding Victorique close to protect her from the flames. Soon there was only one step left.

He felt relieved. He had brought Victorique out of the village to safety, under his own power.

And then...

He felt his body sway.

It was because he felt such a great sense of relief, he thought. But that wasn't it. The bridge was listing to one side.

The last burning remnants of the bridge glowed a brilliant orange and finally crumbled away into the abyss.

Just one last step—

Victorique was first to reach solid earth.

Then Kazuya set foot on the ground after her....

But at that moment, Kazuya's body tilted to the side with the falling bridge. He saw Victorique turn around and her mouth opening to form a cry, but her face disappeared below his sight. Instead, he saw the sky—the vast night sky, filling his vision with twinkling stars.

For a split-second, the sight was so lovely.

And then his body began to fall off the cliff.

The sky full of stars instantly receded into the distance, and he could see Victorique shouting on top of the cliff, Inspector de Blois staring down at him in horror, and Mildred and Ambrose screaming. Across the cliff behind him, he saw the medieval-looking church and stone arch of the village that was beautiful and yet desperately frozen in time. Smoke was still rising from the flames.

On Victorique's chest, he saw the pendant she had shown him when they were in the town downhill, that gold coin strung with a chain, dangling toward him. It was emerging from her ocean of frills and coming closer.

The second his body dropped felt longer than he could have ever imagined. He inspected Victorique's pendant with a detached calmness, then noticed the side of the bridge that Ambrose was on, and wanted to ask why, but the words wouldn't come out. There was a jolt, and then he was falling.

It felt like everything was rushing away from him.

Suddenly, he wanted to see his family again.

The color of the sky in his homeland, the raging sea that he saw from the ship as he crossed the oceans, the moment he first entered his room at the dormitory in St. Marguerite's... And that spring day, when Miss Cécile asked him to climb the labyrinthine staircase of the main library for the very first time....

An array of scenery appeared in his mind, and vanished away.

Pride and chagrin, combined with feelings of regret, assailed him for a brief instant.

His thoughts returned to the country of his birth.

And the reason he had left it...

My father, my brothers... I'm sorry, he whispered, growing sad. I never became the son, the brother, you wanted me to be. So I fled. I didn't really come to this country to study. It was just too painful to stay at home. I felt so pathetic whenever I was with you. But I don't want to think of myself as even more of a worthless man... I'm sorry. It's not that I hate you. Far from it. I respected you all so very much!

In his heart, there had always been a labyrinthine staircase. And he had lost his way on it.

I don't know what to do. I've ended up hating myself. I was lost, I was in pain, so I ran away.... I'm such a worthless man. It's just like Victorique says. I'm nothing but a gifted half-wit, mediocre by anyone's reckoning. There's no value in my existence. So ... it doesn't matter ... if I fall off this cliff....

He thought he saw a golden butterfly stray past him.

A tiny butterfly, with gossamer wings that filtered light like the sun through the trees....

A butterfly he had seen once before, long ago.

Tears welled up in his eyes.

If someone like me falls... It doesn't matter....

The golden butterfly...

Just being able to save Victorique is already a wonderful thing. So, please...

Victorique, Mildred, and Ambrose's faces grew distant.

But one thing didn't. It was Victorique's cherished golden pendant. Rather than fade away, it came closer and closer, lifting off her breast. He saw the tarnished chain snap and fall with him toward the bottom of the ravine.

That pendant she loved so much!

She stretched her arm out and yelled something, trying to catch the pendant.

Don't you fall, too.... It's fine if I do. But you ... you need to take care of yourself!

Just when he thought this, the next moment...

His body swayed.

Kazuya's mind went blank. He couldn't think anymore. It was like someone was shaking him roughly, like awakening suddenly from a dream.

His vision...

Flipped.

He spun, and then all he saw before him was the hard, dark cliff face.

"...Kujou!"

Someone was calling him from above.

He raised his head.

Victorique was above him. She was groaning, wearing a strange look of exertion on her face. Her rosy cheeks were painfully red. *Why am I looking up at her when she's so small*, he wondered.

He looked at his hand.

And realized that she was holding onto him.

Kazuya was dangling off the cliff, and Victorique was crouched on the ground, gripping one of his hands tightly.

He saw the cliff in front of him, and smelled the faint scent of earth.

He heard water from far below.

The turbulent sound of rushing rapids.

Victorique was gritting her teeth.

Kazuya looked at her hand. Her small hands were desperately trying to pull Kazuya up. But Victorique was very weak. Even a single small chair was too heavy for her to lift by herself.

“Victorique... You dropped your precious pendant.”

She only continued to grit her teeth, and said nothing. Then Kazuya realized that the reason she reached out wasn't to catch her pendant, but to grab onto *him*.

Victorique's eyes were riveted to her own straining hands. The backs of her tiny hands had turned purple from lack of circulation. Through her small, clenched, pearly white teeth, she yelled, “What are you doing, Kujou?! Climb up! Stupid!”

“But it doesn't matter...”

“Shut your mouth and climb up, you stupid, half-witted, mediocre, hopeless scoundrel, bad singer, Grim Reaper Kujou!”

“...I'm not a scoundrel... probably.”

“Hurry up!”

Kazuya stared up in wonder at Victorique as she frantically pulled on his hand. *Why is she making such an effort?* he thought. Then something else occurred to him.

“Victorique, your...”

“What?!”

“Don’t your hands hurt?”

“...They don’t.”

“They do, huh?”

“...They don’t.”

“But...”

“If I say they don’t, then they don’t!”

As she stubbornly repeated herself, Kazuya carefully watched her face. *Oh! he suddenly thought. Of course they hurt. Victorique is a big crybaby. Victorique ... is telling a lie. It’s the first time I’ve seen her do that. Huh, what a funny face she’s making....*

Her cheeks were puffier than ever, and her emerald-green eyes were watery.

“Kujou, hurry! ...What are you smiling about! I’m telling you to hurry!”

Kazuya came back to reality. Victorique’s small legs were slipping ever closer to the edge of the cliff. At this rate, they would both end up falling over. Even so, she desperately held onto him.

“We’re going home together. I said that to you before. We’re going home together. I said that to you. I said it.”

“...Yeah.”

“So hurry up, you idiot, scoundrel, tone-deaf Grim Reaper!”

“Sorry, you’re right... Victorique.”

“What was that!?” she roared.

His voice unusually subdued, Kazuya said, “Hey ... thanks.”

“Idiooooot!”

Kazuya chuckled sheepishly. Then he finally reached out and

grabbed onto a tree root that stuck out of the ground. He wrapped his hand around it, and managed to pull himself up bit by bit.

He slowly dragged himself closer to the top. Victorique's tiny breaths echoed loudly in his ear. From afar he heard the sound of flames spreading. At last, he was able to lift himself up all the way up to the ground, where he caught his breath. He was so exhausted that he thought he might fall asleep right then and there.

Kazuya drew in a deep lungful of air. As he exhaled, he could feel the sorrowful emotions that had seized him only moments ago dissipate from his body.

He fell to his knees and gasped for air.

After a few moments, Kazuya raised his head, and gazed at Victorique, who was hunched over next to him.

Victorique was sitting flat on the ground with her small hands held open. She was peering closely at her palms, a puzzled look on her face.

Kazuya peeked at her hands.

They were red and swollen. Her skin, unused to carrying heavy things, was very delicate, and painfully puffy as if she had burned herself.

“...Victorique.”

Noticing Kazuya's gaze, Victorique quickly hid her hands behind her back. Then she noticed the blood streaming from the wound on his arm and began to stare at it, her face still puzzled..

“Victorique, um...”

Kazuya tried to say something, but Victorique only snorted angrily. She turned her back to him and murmured softly, “I bet you thought it wouldn't matter if you fell.”

“Uh, w-well...”

Victorique's voice sounded very angry. Kazuya scratched his head, unsure of what to say.

She spoke curtly, still sounding angry. "You can't fall."

"...I know."

"Stupid," Victorique murmured, her voice so tiny that he could barely hear it.

three

As the curtain of night fell, the villagers put out the rising flames. The carriage from the town of Horowitz at the foot of the mountain arrived some time later to retrieve the travelers. In the darkness, the old coachman seemed not to notice the disaster that had befallen the nameless village. He simply eyed the line of people—Kazuya, Victorique, Inspector de Blois, Derek, Mildred, and Ambrose—and muttered in puzzlement, “I brought six here, and I’m taking back six again ... but is it the same six?”

When it came time for Ambrose to climb into the carriage, he hesitated, and looked back at the basin where the village was. The basin merely sat there in the twilight, unmoving like a stubborn old man, giving no hint of the human lives it contained.

As if trying to explain himself to no one in particular, Ambrose murmured, “When I saw that bridge burning down, I just ... ran through the fire. I’ve always wanted to cross that bridge. Ever since I found out about the outside world from Brian Roscoe... Ever since I found out the nameless village wasn’t all there was to the world... I realized that I, more than anyone, couldn’t live out the rest of my days there.”

With this, Ambrose drew himself up and climbed into the carriage. He extended his hand to the hemp cord that bound his hair, quickly untied it, and threw it out of the window. His silken golden hair fluttered free, spilling down around his feminine, refined features.

Victorique said quietly, “The outside world is ... a good place.”

Kazuya gave a slight gasp, and gently squeezed Victorique’s small hand. Inspector de Blois pretended he didn’t see them, but then his eyes briefly strayed toward his half-sister.

“You may never be let out again. Not after causing all this uproar.”

“Even so, I am satisfied.”

Kazuya was startled by her answer. This was the first time that he had seen this pair of siblings, who held each other at such a strange distance, actually speak directly to one another—barbed and sinister though the words may have been.

“I have cleared Cordelia’s name. Daughters must always protect their mothers’ honor.”

“...Hmph!” Inspector de Blois snorted. “Even if Cordelia Gallo was driven out of her home village on a false charge, it doesn’t change the fact that that woman caused a lot of trouble during the Great War. And it doesn’t change the fact that the daughter who inherited her blood can never be allowed to live freely.”

“Is that father’s version of events?”

“What?!” The inspector turned a menacing glare upon his tiny half-sister. Victorique quietly returned his gaze, showing no signs of fear.

The inside of the carriage fell silent.

And then, with hooves pounding against the steep slopes, they began to descend the mountain, the carriage shaking just as violently as it had on the way up.

“What will happen to the village now?” Kazuya quietly wondered aloud.

Ambrose, sitting in the seat across from him, answered him. “I can’t say. I’m sure it will take some time for them to rebuild the drawbridge. But I suppose ... they’ll continue living the same way that they always have.” His face was pale and haggard.

“What about you, Ambrose?”

“Me, well ... I’ve always longed for the outside world. I don’t know how things will turn out, but I think I’d like to live out there.”

Derek had kept his silence, but now he spoke, his high voice

wretched. “What’s so good about the outside world? You people don’t know the value of those antiques. And so many of them burned in the end....”

Mildred sighed, remembering. “Yeah. That means money must have burned in that fire, too. Makes me sad just to think of it...”

Inspector de Blois poked Derek’s head, sighed in disgust, and addressed him lecturingly. “Derek, you were just about to undergo judgment by that village of antiques. And you can readily assume that their punishment would be a lot more brutal than what you’d get under the laws of Sauvure. Did you see that axe? Getting your head chopped off by that dull, rusty, medieval axe isn’t a very appetizing thought, is it? The first blow probably wouldn’t be enough to cut your head off; they’d have to chop down on you over and over again, and it would be a long and painful time before you could finally die....” He trailed off, shuddering at his own words.

The inside of the carriage was quiet for the next few minutes.

They could hear the rhythmic thumping of the horses’ hooves as they descended the mountain road. The carriage heaved back and forth with a jarring rattle.

At last, the inspector mumbled, “Anyway, what was that kingdom of Seyrune thing all about?”

“...Seyrune?” Victorique repeated.

The inspector quickly oriented himself toward Kazuya; apparently, he no longer wished to speak with his sister. He began to speak through Kazuya as he normally did. “When the headman and I were arguing over what to do about Derek, he said something strange. ‘This isn’t Sauvure,’ and ‘This is no village.’ Then he announced, very proudly, ‘This is the Kingdom of Seyrune, and I’m the king’.” He shrugged. “You can’t just go live in the mountains and declare yourself your own country. This land belongs to Sauvure. What a crazy old man. ...Oops, excuse me.” He noticed Ambrose’s gaze, and squirmed slightly.

Victorique sighed deeply. “I see. So that’s why....”

All eyes turned to her.

She languidly ran her fingers through her long blond hair. Then she narrowed her eyes a little sleepily, and looked at Kazuya sitting next to her. “Kujou, do you remember what I said about the ‘chosen people’?”

“Yeah, I do.” Kazuya nodded. “About the gods of Greek mythology, and the Norse giants, and the celestial beings of China...”

“Right. While I was reading material on this subject, I realized that in actual history—for the most part, ancient history—there did appear people who seemed like gods.” She sighed. “Long ago, a forest people once conquered eastern Europe. Their legends still live on to this day. The Baltic coast was invaded many times, but that forest people was absolutely never defeated. Their bodies were small and weak, but they repelled invaders by means of their uncommon intelligence. They defeated the Khazars in the ninth century, the Pechenegs in the tenth through eleventh centuries, and the Kipchaks in the twelfth century. And they also fended off the invasions of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Most of their enemies were large tribesmen on horseback who attacked from the plains. The Seyrune lived in splendor, but at the outset of the fifteenth century, they suddenly vanished. Not because of any wars. They simply disappeared one day from the annals of history. So where did they end up?”

No one had an answer.

“Their name is the Seyrune.”

Someone gasped.

Ambrose timidly said, “I don’t know about that history, but we in the village are taught that we are Seyrune. I’ve been told since I was a child that although this is the kingdom of Sauvure, and our land takes the form of a village, we aren’t actually a village; we’re a kingdom.... But we’re never allowed to say that. We must never let that name leave our lips. Otherwise we’ll be persecuted, and our village burned down.”

“Yes. They are a persecuted people.” Victorique nodded. “What comes to mind when you think of the fifteenth century? That was the time of the Inquisition and of witch hunts. The small, clever, and enigmatic Seyrune were swept up in that wave and labeled heretics, and were eventually unable to retain their tiny kingdom on the Baltic coast. They were driven out, not because of war, but because of persecution. And starting in the fifteenth century, the legends of the ‘Grey Wolves’ suddenly appear in Sauvure, of quiet wolves who lived deep in the forest and could speak human languages, and children who were particularly bright being called children of the Grey Wolves.... Is that not because the Seyrune were driven from the Baltic coast in the fifteenth century, and fled to the mountains of Sauvure to live there in secret? And are they not called ‘Grey Wolves’ because of the wolves that dwelled abundantly in the forests of Eastern Europe where they once lived? But after they fled to Sauvure, their villages were burned whenever they were discovered, and they were driven once again into the forest. Eventually, their numbers dwindled, and all that remained of them was an old and traditional village. This is most likely that village.”

Victorique lowered her voice. “Do you remember the midsummer festival, with that battle between summer and winter armies? That was a ritual to pray for a good harvest; similar traditions exist all over Europe. But why was the Winter Army the only one on horseback? I can venture a hypothesis about this. Namely, that it originates from their long history of battling enemies who were mounted on horseback. It isn’t only a ritual to banish winter, but also a ritual to expel the seasonal invasion of large horse-riding tribesmen, driving them out of the lush forests and back to the dry plains where they came from.”

The carriage continued its rough descent down the mountain.

The flame in the lantern flashed on Victorique’s face, plunging it into the dark shadows and bringing it back out, over and over again.

No one said a word.

At last, Victorique spoke in her husky voice. “At any rate, all of this belongs to the distant past. And we are living in the present. In the

present...”

A wheel hit something large, perhaps a rock or tree root, and the carriage rocked wildly.

The lantern snapped back and forth, and for a brief moment, it shone brightly on Ambrose’s face on the opposite side of the carriage.

Tears were glistening on his cheeks. “In the present?” he asked softly.

Victorique nodded.

“Oh... Then, we must live on,” he murmured, smiling slightly, but it was hard to make out in the dark.

Mildred yawned widely, then muttered, “I don’t understand all this complicated stuff, but all I know is if you’re healthy and have money, that’s good enough. You don’t need anything else. Though I sure wish I had more money!”

Ambrose chuckled. Kazuya responded with a smile of his own. Mildred yawned again, then closed her eyes, too tired to stay awake any longer.

The carriage continued clattering down the mountain. Horse hooves thundered on the twisting and turning road.

Victorique let out a tiny yawn.

“Are you tired? Did you get sleepy?” Kazuya asked.

She nodded silently. Then she whispered, “Kujou, sing.”

“...You want me to sing?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Jeez...” Kazuya sighed.

Then he began to sing a children's song that he knew well. As he sang in a full voice, he thought he heard Victorique giggle softly. "Wh-what?"

"...You're terrible."

"So are you, Victorique."

Victorique giggled some more.

The carriage still had a long way to go.

four

Once they finally reached the town at the base of the mountain, it was well into nighttime. They checked in at the town's sole inn, and made plans to leave the next morning. When the innkeeper noticed Ambrose's blond hair, his elegantly beautiful face, and his medieval-looking attire, he murmured fearfully, "A Grey Wolf!"

But Ambrose began breathlessly asking questions about what it was like to manage an inn or how the telephone worked or why there was a dead bird pinned to the front door, and with each question, the innkeeper's fearfulness seemed to fade away a little bit more. Instead, he became steadily irritated, and at last lost his temper. "Don't pester me with questions like an unreasonable child. Just how old are you?!" he shouted, and fled the scene.

The sky was clear the next morning. The travelers climbed aboard the mountain train, made their descent, then transferred to yet another steam locomotive ... and in the afternoon, they finally returned to the familiar village that was the home of St. Marguerite's.

Mildred covered her summer dress with her cumbersome nun's habit, and prepared to return to the church. Sighing, she uttered a few last words of complaint. "Back to my tedious life..." And as soon as she had closed her mouth, her brilliant red curls were already tucked away into the depths of her habit, her face assumed a certain stiffness, and at a glance, she could have been any other nun. She loudly stomped away.

Inspector de Blois accompanied Derek into a carriage bound for the police station. He looked out of the carriage's window toward Kazuya and Victorique, and said, "Anyway, just go back to school for the time being. I'll send them further instructions at a later date."

Kazuya felt uneasy at his dark tone, but he couldn't guess what it meant for them in the future.

The carriage carrying the inspector and Derek receded into the distance. Mildred was nowhere to be seen.

Everyone was going their separate ways.

The journey was over.

As they came out to the main road that led from the station to the village, a comfortable, summery breeze was in the air. People filled the street with noontime traffic. The rows of shops were lively and bustling with customers coming and going.

A horse-drawn omnibus ran next to them, and on the other side of the road, an automobile of the latest model sped past with a noisy rattle.

Ambrose was looking all around in wonder. “So this is the present...”

He began to walk away, no apparent destination in mind. His expression betrayed mixed emotions of anxiety and pleasure. Kazuya and Victorique watched him wander off.

A sweet fruity scent from the vineyards, along with the warm scent of earth, drifted through on a gentle breeze. In the distance, they could hear the high-pitched whistle of the next steam engine coming into the station.

It was a typical slow-paced day in the village.

Ambrose ran back to them, seeming to suddenly remember something. He grabbed Kazuya, and with a mildly perplexed look, whispered into his ear. “I forgot to ask you something about the prophecy.”

“By prophecy, you mean the one we had in the village?”

“Yes. Why did you and your friend...”

“Me and Victorique?”

“Yes.” Ambrose shook his head in befuddlement. “Why did you both ask the same question?”

“Th-the same...?” Kazuya tilted his head.

He remembered the look on Victorique’s face when she emerged from the church: highly disgruntled, and her eyes welling up with tears.

Kazuya had assumed that she had been told something very shocking, and then she told him that she had asked if she would grow any taller....

The same question? It’s not like I asked if Victorique would grow any more....

Kazuya pondered to himself for a moment....

“Ah!” And then the answer finally dawned on him.

No, it’s the opposite! Victorique asked the same question I did. It wasn’t really about whether she would grow or not....

She asked... “Can I be with Kazuya Kujou forever?”

She received the same answer he did.

And that was why she shed those tears.

Ambrose went on musingly. “If you had both asked different questions, then you could have learned two things about the future. But I guess this was just something you really wanted to ask. Hmm...” With this, he sauntered off blithely.

Kazuya returned to Victorique’s side, and began to stare very closely at her face. Annoyed, she snapped, “What? Why are you staring at me like that?”

“No, no reason...”

“Then go look over there.”

“...Hey!”

And once again, his forgotten anger bubbled up inside of him.

Victorique always made him so furious. She was just so clever and so acid-tongued that he didn't have the faintest idea of what to do with her. Victorique was the strange one, not him. She made a fool out of him and treated him like a servant, while simultaneously acting like he was some unwanted guest. And...

And...

I'm glad we could go home safe together.

That's all there was to it.

Kazuya watched Ambrose vanish into the distance.

When he first met him in the nameless village, Ambrose looked so much like the rest of the villagers in his old-fashioned clothing and polite manner. Only the sparkle in his eyes spoke of his vivacious nature. But now, as he walked down a modern street with his hands in his pockets, whistling a tune, an easy spring in his stride—it was like he had blended into his surroundings in the blink of an eye, becoming simply a part of the scenery. The effect of his change in attitude was enough to overcome even the strangeness of his clothes. A group of local girls passed next to him, and turned back to gaze at him dreamily, sighing in admiration. Ambrose noticed them, and blushed slightly, but managed a cordial nod.

He had acclimated in an instant.

A warm spring breeze blew. His long, glossy blond hair, like strands of silk hanging down his slender back, danced up into the wind.

By the time the wind died down, Ambrose had disappeared. He had turned some corner, and walked away....

“I wonder what will happen to him now?” Kazuya murmured, a bit of concern in his voice.

Victorique was silent. An ineffable light, akin to yearning, swelled

in her eyes. Perhaps she envied Ambrose who had gained his freedom. But she admitted nothing. She merely gave Kazuya's question a brief answer.

"He will live on. The same way Cordelia Gallo did."

And that was the end of their journey.

friends

epilogue — friends

On a cloudless afternoon...

Sunshine blazed down on the parched dirt road—soon, summer would arrive. The ivies entwined around the wood-framed houses and the red geraniums dangling from the second story windows shone under the sun's rays.

It was a calm and comfortable noontime.

The door to a small post office on a village street corner slowly opened, and a slight Asian boy wearing the uniform of St. Marguerite's School came out. He carefully adjusted his hat, then straightened his posture and started walking.

In his hand was a small, square package affixed with international postage.

Across the street from the post office, a tall, slim girl wearing the uniform of the same school bolted out of a small flower shop. She had short blond hair and eyes that sparkled with vitality.

When the girl saw the boy—Kazuya Kujou—her face immediately lit up. "Kujou!"

Kazuya heard someone call his name, then saw the girl—Avril Bradley—and smiled. "Hi, Avril."

"What are you up to? Oh, looks like you got another package this week. Did that come from home?"

"Yeah. My brother finally sent the book I've been asking—whoa, whoa, Avril!"

"Is it money? Is it money? Huh, is that all?" Avril snatched the package from Kazuya's hands and opened the seal, but when she

saw that all it contained was an old book written in an Asian language, she didn't bother to conceal her disappointment.

"...Like I said, it's just a book. A while back, I wrote to my oldest brother and asked him to send it to me. Now it finally arrived." He walked along, then muttered softly, "Although his timing was a little off..."

"Hmm? So what kind of book is it?"

"It's, well... No, never mind. It's not important." Kazuya suddenly blushed, and grabbed the green book out of Avril's hands.

Avril pouted in displeasure, and took the book back. She turned it all around and examined it from every angle, but the Far Eastern script remained impenetrable, and she reluctantly handed it back to Kazuya.

They walked down the main street through air that felt slightly smoky from dust particles drifting through the sunlight. An old horse with long tufts of fur on its legs slowly pulled a wagon beside them. A warm, bittersweet smell wafted from the mountains of hay piled up on the wagon, a smell that could only mean summer was about to begin.

As they approached the school, the road grew more and more deserted, and there were fewer houses. From this point onward, gentle slopes meandered up into the mountains.

"...That reminds me, Avril," Kazuya said loudly, trying to change the subject away from the book. "You know, a lot of things happened to me last week. It would take too long to explain, so I'll just leave it at that ... But do you remember that nun we met at the bazaar in the flea market?"

"Yeah."

"Well, her name is Mildred, and we got to know each other. She said she would let me have one of the things she had for sale at the bazaar, so ... this is for you."

Kazuya opened his book bag and started to rummage around inside.

The moment he said “for you,” Avril’s face burst into a smile, and she happily peeked inside his bag.

“For me?”

“Yes. I thought I’d give it to you, since you seemed to like it so much.”

Inside his bag, a golden object was gleaming ominously.

The smile disappeared from Avril’s face like a wisp of smoke. Kazuya wrapped his hand around the golden object, looked up, and found her pursing her lips in an expression that could only be described as extremely angry.

“You kept insisting that you wanted it, so I decided to ... give ... Avril, what’s wrong? What is it? Why are you making that face?”

Kazuya’s eyes met Avril’s, as the object—a fist-sized golden skull—rested stupidly on top of his head.

Avril gave him a long, sharp glare. For some reason, tears were beginning to collect at the corners of her clear blue eyes. Kazuya stammered, taken aback. His head bobbed, and the golden skull fell off, rolling down the sloping road, sending puffs of dust into the air as it tumbled.

Kazuya hastily ran after the skull, and from behind, he heard Avril’s voice.

“Kujou, you are so *stuuupid!*”

“...Whaat?!”

Kazuya finally managed to pick up the skull, and just as he looked up, Avril was running down the street as gracefully as a gazelle. Startled, he ran after her, but Avril was fast, and he barely managed to shorten the distance between them. When they reached the front of the school, he saw the hem of her skirt disappear into the campus through a certain hidden passage—the one she had sawed through the hedge.

“Wait, Avril! Why are you so angry? Hey!” Kazuya dashed through the passageway, getting himself scratched by thin branches and tangled up in leaves. And when he emerged onto the school grounds...

“Av ... ril... Oh, Miss Cécile. Um, hello...”

Avril was nowhere to be found, apparently successful in her escape. Instead, Kazuya found himself eye to eye with his teacher Cécile, who was crouched over the lawn, tending to her violets.

“...Kujou?”

He nervously brushed away the leaves and broken twigs from his body. Cécile stared up at him in bewilderment, and then gasped, turning her stare on the hedge, finally putting the pieces together.

She had seen something that should not have been there—a small hole around the right size for someone to slip through.

“Kujou!?”

“...I-I’m sorry!”

“So the one who trampled all over my violets...”

“I’m sorry; it was me....”

“So that’s how it happened. When Miss Victorique sneaked away from school, was it through this hole? You both insisted that the front gate was open, and I took your word for it... But did you actually go through here? K-Kujou!?”

“I-I’m sorry....” Kazuya bowed his head and apologized over and over again. Cécile was quite clearly incensed, and subjected him to an endless scolding over the violets, the lawn, and Victorique.

The gardener would have to be called in to repair the hedge immediately. Just as Kazuya silently wondered if Avril would be disappointed, he glimpsed a flash of blond hair behind a tree trunk.

It was Avril.

Although she had returned to campus before he did, perhaps she realized that he had been caught by Cécile, and came back to check on him.

In the end, Cécile sentenced Kazuya to a month of cleaning the restrooms and no nighttime outings for a week, and then took her leave.

Kazuya started to walk away with downcast eyes, but next he felt something thud against his head. Rubbing his head, he turned around in time to see Avril's slim figure running away. At his feet lay a crumpled piece of paper. Was this what had hit him...?

He picked it up, opened it, and sure enough, he had guessed correctly. In Avril's delicate, rounded handwriting, the following was written:

To Kujou:

Thanks for not telling the teacher that I'm the one who made the secret passage.

...But I don't want that skull. You're definitely still stuupid!

—Avril

Kazuya smoothed out the crumpled piece of paper, folded it into a tidy square, and put it in his breast pocket.

...He just didn't get it.

"Maybe not knowing why I'm being called *stuupid* is what makes me *stuupid*?" he muttered.

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind rushed toward him, stirring his black hair and the hem of his uniform.

When the wind stilled, warm air surrounded him.

Summer was fast approaching.

“...Well, at least realizing that much is better than not knowing at all, right, Kujou the idiot?”

St. Marguerite’s Library was an old and stately building that had witnessed over three hundred years of history. After surviving the devastation of the Great War, it had become increasingly famous throughout Europe for its repository of books.

However, because of a policy of secrecy that limited entry to students and those connected to the school, there were few who knew of its existence. The library was always deserted, filled only with the scent of dust, mildew, and knowledge.

A wooden labyrinth of stairs led to the dizzyingly high reaches of the library. Just as he did every day, Kazuya took several minutes out of his afternoon to climb up the stairs by himself, making his way up to his friend at the very top.

The top floor held a conservatory, lush with tropical vegetation and flowers, bathed in dazzling sunlight that streamed in from the skylights. And there he would find a beautiful, albeit very small girl who looked exactly like a porcelain doll. That day would be no different. It never seemed to change.

The girl—Victorique de Blois—sat hidden among piles of books, her demeanor so poised that the ordeals of the previous week’s journey might as well have never happened. They hadn’t yet received any word from her half-brother, Gréville de Blois. Kazuya doubted that any punishment would befall her, but still ... a twinge of anxiety remained.

A thin strand of white smoke floated up to the skylights from the ceramic pipe held in Victorique’s small mouth. Kazuya followed the smoke until he found her petite body inside the mound of books, then sat down next to her.

“...Don’t call me an idiot. I’ve had women getting angry at me all day, and it’s really getting me down.”

“I may not know all the details, but whatever it is, I’m sure you brought it on yourself.”

“Tch!” Kazuya’s mood instantly soured.

But Victorique continued, indifferent to his plight. “Because all you do is act as if you know the first thing about others when you don’t understand them at all, and lose your temper and break off friendships over the most ridiculous things. For heaven’s sake, you are a senseless fellow.”

“E-excuse me?!”

“Hmph! Look into your own heart for the answer!”

“Sheesh, what do you want from me. Oh, well. Victorique, do you want this? I don’t really know what it’s for myself, so I can’t exactly tell you what to do with it.”

Victorique was ardently smoking her pipe, her head buried deeply between the pages of a large and heavy book. But when she heard Kazuya, she irritably looked up and glanced at the object he was offering her. And just as she was about to thrust her head back into her books...

“...What the hell is that!?”

Kazuya abashedly drew back his hand, which held the golden skull. “I wonder. A paperweight, maybe?”

“Kujou, by and large you are a dull and mediocre individual.”

“Lay off!”

“But once in a while, you’ll do something that I just can’t figure out.”

“That’s not a ... compliment ... is it?”

“Is this one of those mysteries of the Orient? Or are you just odd all by yourself?”

Victorique’s harsh tongue was beginning to sting a little too much, and he didn’t have it in him to retort. “I’ll just leave this here,” he said in a small voice, and set the golden skull down on the floor.

Then he noticed something else that was on the floor.

It was the strange Indian-style hat that he had given to Victorique. Apparently, she had no interest in it as a hat. Instead, she had placed it on the ground upside down, and crammed it full of whiskey bonbons and macarons.

Victorique, by means of her all-discerning wellspring of wisdom, had chosen to reincarnate the hat as a candy holder.

Kazuya plopped the skull down next to the hat—they really did look strange next to each other. “Speaking of mysteries of the Orient, Victorique.”

“What about them, Kujou the foolish reaper from across the seas?”

“...You always have to have the last word, don’t you?” His spirits flagging, Kazuya took a certain object out from his bag.

It was the book he had received in the mail that day, sent by his eldest brother.

Victorique raised her head, a look of boredom on her face. But when she saw that the object was a book, she tore it out of his hands with an unexpected intensity and started to flip through the pages. Realizing that it was in an unfamiliar language, she frowned, tiny wrinkles forming on her brow as she perused the book, grunting to herself.

The book featured illustration after illustration of two men grappling with each other.

“...Just what the devil is this book?”

“It’s about Oriental martial arts. My father and brothers know a lot about it, but it’s Greek to me. So I asked my eldest brother to send me this book.”

“A book of martial arts...?” Victorique murmured thoughtfully, lifting her face.

Kazuya avoided her eyes. He reddened slightly.

During their first journey together aboard a terrifying ship, they had narrowly escaped with their lives, and afterward Kazuya couldn't help feeling some regret. He had never been interested in the fighting techniques that his father and brother had taught him, and didn't think it mattered if he learned them well or not. But on that boat, alone with tiny Victorique and lacking any hope of rescue, Kazuya felt remorseful from the bottom of his heart for not having applied himself more.

With this in mind, Kazuya wrote a letter to his eldest brother. In between reporting his school performance and relaying his observations of the country, he also asked if he could send him a book on hand-to-hand combat techniques.

But not only was his brother's timing a little off; the book hadn't arrived until after Kazuya had experienced his second adventure and was already back at school.

Come to think of it, he's always been this way.... He never gave me snacks until after a meal, and never helped me study until after the exam was over. He's a good person, but then again, he's always done things like this....

For that reason, despite being intelligent and good-looking, his eldest brother had had his heart broken time after time. Once, he had spent all night writing a love letter, but by the time he delivered it to the home of the object of his affections, she was already in the middle of celebrating her wedding to another man. Apparently his brother had gotten over his grief with the help of a fierce [rubdown](#) with a towel....

“...Looks like a letter came with it, too.”

“Oh, really?”

Victorique handed the letter to Kazuya. The writing was large and scrawling—this was his eldest brother's handwriting. Kazuya opened it and began to read.

What led to the sudden change of heart? Kazuya, you've never wanted to read this kind of book before. Your brother and I have been

scratching our heads. But this is a good sign. We've recently had some serious discussions with father about you becoming manlier and growing up tall....

When Kazuya read up to this point, his heart sank like a stone.

...By the way, our father is very pleased with your excellent grades. Your brother and I are also proud of you. It appears to have been the right decision for you to leave the country and study in the outside world. But your mother and sister are terribly lonely even though your brother and I are still here. They seem to find it very dull without you. I consider that favoritism.

A ghost of a smile appeared on Kazuya's face.

However, there are things a man must do. I've made it very clear to your mother and sister that you are on a great journey into becoming a man, and women and children should stay out of the way. Kazuya, you must become an adult and come back as soon as possible. Become successful in your own life, so that you may serve your country. I sincerely hope that you won't ever turn into the type of man who lives a worthless life instead of living for the well-being of his nation. Be someone great. As we await your return, we too shall continue devoting ourselves wholeheartedly to our country.
—Your brother.

Kazuya folded the letter, and sighed.

His eyes grew distant.

When he suddenly became quiet, Victorique looked up at him. A slight hint of worry appeared on her face. But the unusual book from the Far East once again recaptured her attention, and she went back to burying her head in it.

But a few moments later...

She quietly lifted her head from the book and looked at Kazuya.

He was still sighing.

Victorique peered at him curiously, then seemed to lose interest,

and turned her gaze away.

Nii-san... Wallowing in dejection, Kazuya sat between the staircase and the conservatory, his head bent low. I'll never be that great man ... I'll never be what he wants me to be. And is a person really only worthwhile if he lives for his country? I wonder... Oh, I don't understand these things at—

Thunk!

Suddenly, he felt a dull pain in the back of his head. He started to turn around, but lost his balance. With a shriek, he tumbled down several steps of the labyrinthine staircase.

Kazuya had rolled off to the side, mere centimeters away from falling into the deep abyss below. Clinging to the side of the staircase, he managed to pull himself back up. Then he saw Victorique staring down at him in surprise, her hand thrust forward in a fist.

“Oh, you’re still here?”

“Was that ... you, just now...?”

Victorique opened her mouth in a wide yawn and set the book down.

Kazuya quickly crawled up the staircase. “*Victori-ique!*?”

“Oh, I just thought I’d stick my hand out how it says in the illustrations of this book. You just happened to be in the way.”

“Liar! You did that on purpose. Just to amuse yourself ... right?”

“Hmph. So what if I did?”

“If, God forbid, I were to die, then what would you do?!”

“...I wouldn’t do anything.”

Kazuya again took his seat beside Victorique, and turned away from her, hugging his knees. He took a macaron from the candy holder,

unwrapped it, and put it in his mouth. Victorique watched him with disapproval, but didn't complain.

Finally, Kazuya whispered, "That's not true."

"Not true? What's not true?"

"That you wouldn't do anything. Victorique, you'd be unhappy if I disappeared, wouldn't you?"

She didn't answer.

Kazuya murmured silently in his heart. *You cried a little bit back there, when you heard your fortune.*

The thought alone troubled him, and so he added, *and you saved me. You gave everything you could to save me. Isn't that right, Victorique?*

But he didn't let the words escape his lips.

The inside of the library slowly darkened underneath the setting sun. Even the sunshine streaming in from the skylights began to shine a little lonelier and quieter than before.

Victorique sat in her usual spot, immersed in her reading.

Kazuya was sitting very still beside her, leaning against a stack of books. With her face still buried in a book, Victorique suddenly pricked her ears.

She heard him breathing softly—he had fallen asleep. Grimacing in exasperation, she went back to her book, ignoring him.

A few minutes later...

She lifted her head from her book.

"Kujou, did you fall asleep?"

Instead of a response, all she heard were his gentle exhalations.

“Are you asleep?”

Another soft sigh.

“You’re asleep, huh,” she repeated.

A mild gust of air came in through the skylights, accompanying the warm sunshine. The gaudily-colored flowers in full bloom and the fronds of the tall palm trees swayed lightly.

“Friends mean more to me than books,” Victorique abruptly said.

Kazuya bolted upright from his sleep. Victorique’s shoulders jumped.

The wind blew again, fluttering their hair, gold and black alike.

Kazuya giggled happily.

For a brief moment, Victorique’s rosy cheeks flushed ever so slightly red.

afterword

(Some material in this afterword for Gosick II is repeated in GosickS I. Although the stories in GosickS I began serialization in December 2003, they weren't compiled into a book with an afterword until July 2005 after Gosick IV, whereas Gosick II was first published in May 2004. See the [about](#) page for more details.)

Hello everyone. This is Kazuki Sakuraba.

Allow me to present my latest work, “Gosick II—The Crime Without a Name.” Picking up where volume one left off, Victorique and Kazuya escape from St. Marguerite’s and go on an adventure! This time, they pursue the mystery of Victorique’s mother all the way to an enigmatic village deep in the mountains, where they also end up solving another case. If you want to know the rest of the story, please read this volume ... anyway ...

Aaaaaah, I have so many pages to write for the afterword again. Around fifteen pages. I’ve never seen such long afterwords before!

Well, what should I write about? Last time, I wrote about “Go→Sick!” and the slightly peculiar behavior of some of my friends....

Oh, yes. Recently, [Ichirou Sakaki](#) invited me to visit this vocational college as a guest speaker. So I ended up telling some rambling behind-the-scenes anecdotes about writing Gosick. But the students all seemed very pleasant, and I didn’t see any oddballs prone to peculiar behavior, so, uh, I guess that’s all there is to say about that. Argh, I’m only four lines in....

Hmm...

It’s best if I keep myself surrounded by people who are constantly committing peculiar behavior. Then my wellspring of vignettes for my afterwords will be sure to gush copiously forth.

However...

My mainstay (?), the stone lion thief, is a teacher at a middle school, and since she gets very busy in the [springtime](#), she's been in an extraordinarily bad mood. Not long ago, when I was gathering material to use for this afterword, I tried calling her during her lunch break:

Kazuki Sakuraba: Steal anything lately?

Stone Lion Thief: Shut up! I'm hanging up!

...She really lost her temper there. Brr, that's cold! Good friends are the spice of life. I think we should all cherish them more. Rather than always be so childish.

I can think of no other option but to tell the story of the other stone lion thief.

Perhaps the number of people who steal stone lions is shockingly high, because when I think about it, there's another person very close to me who has done the same thing. Now, let us tell this person's story. He was someone unexpectedly close.

[The Tale of the Showa-era Stone Lion Bandit]

He was my grandfather, on my mother's side.

What first brought this back to mind was during last New Year's Eve. For some reason, everyone I ran into at Fujimi Shobo's year-end party told me, "Hey, where's the stone lion thief?" And I would think to myself, "Why should I bring her?!" I didn't know why, but my mind was full of stone lions as I returned home.

Feeling a little buzzed, I crawled into bed in my apartment in Tokyo where I was living by myself. And just as I was about to fall asleep, a single vague image floated up into the darkness of my closed eyelids.

Something weird-looking, whitish grey, with rounded lines...

Two weird-looking somethings...

Oh, I'm so sleepy. I'm falling asleep....

But their outlines were getting clearer. Hmm...? They look kinda like rocks. Oh, I see a face. What am I looking at here? This is...

This... This is...

I jumped up in bed.

“Stone lions!”

I was suddenly super alert. You know how sometimes in mysteries, when characters end up recalling by chance some unpleasant memory that had been sealed in their childhood? It was exactly like that.

Despite my agitation, my memories were starting to come back to me.

What I remembered was a room that looked like the quiet home library of my late grandfather, at his estate built among the mountains. My grandfather was a botanist. His library was enveloped in a peaceful atmosphere that just made you want to disturb it. In that room, ruled only by knowledge and stillness, there were heavy-looking books that looked like encyclopedias lined up in a row on top of a sturdy chest. And supporting both sides of those books were two stone grey bookends...

The problem was that these bookends were obviously not the kind that you can buy. One could not help but notice that these were none other than the so-called [stone guardian lions](#).

But then I reconsidered: memory is something that can be reshaped, and I might have just now constructed a memory of them being stone guardian lions, only because I had been thinking that they looked like them. So I calmly went back to sleep.

But the next day, and the day after that, I couldn't shake the feeling that those bookends in my grandfather's library had to be stone guardian lions, placed there ever so casually.

Not only could I not shake the feeling, but my memories were getting clearer and clearer. Those casual-looking stone lions were... well, not really casual at all, come to think of it.

Actually, they felt really alive...

Curiosity was eating away at me.

It was almost New Year's at the time, so I decided to ask my family about it when I visited them.

Getting there from Tokyo took about an hour by plane. I arrived on a certain day in December to a land of clean air, surrounded by greenery, with snow fluttering down on the ground in big clumps....

[to be continued]

...I apologize. Forgive me. Why'd I throw in that "to be continued"?

The truth is that this story was supposed to go on another ten pages or so, but my editor Mr. K-dou had previously called to inform me, "I thought about it, but the story about your grandpa... It might get a little long. Um, just a hunch, okay?" So I crossed it out with tears in my eyes. I guess it is pretty long. And on second thought, people might not be too interested in a story about my grandpa stealing stone lions and my grandma getting really worried because of them.... The only characters are my grandpa, grandma, and the stone lions, like some folktale.

Not only that, but it might be more fun if I included the stories about the beautiful woman who wears a weird bra, or people with gushing nosebleeds. So I think I'll save this Stone Lion Theater for another time. To be continued in the ! (I'm sowwy...)

Now I think I'll wrest the subject into another direction and go into the story of the lady who gushes blood from her nose.

[Run, sempai!]

This is about my sempai at the karate dojo that I attend. She's an office lady. Like I wrote in the afterword for volume one, she's not only cerebral and gorgeous, but also very strong. Yet she'll have

these random profuse nosebleeds. And on top of all that, I thought of another strange weak point that she has. And this is a fatal flaw for a martial artist.

She is extremely poor at losing weight.

It was the eve of an important match, and the participants were all struggling to lose weight. Well, I've always been on the petite side, and I'm usually in the smallest and lightest weight class, so I'm always getting lectured with things like, "Do you want to die? Gain some weight!" or "Can't you get any taller? Another 5 cm would be great" (as if I could!), so I was already taking my time trying to eat more. And in this tournament, I had a lot of opponents. That's because most of the other participants had [chosen to enter in a lighter class](#) rather than the one that corresponded to their original weight, so they had a month to lose five kilos. Everyone was really touchy about it.

Before another important match that had taken place recently, there I was standing in front of the dojo, chomping on Pocky and chatting with a high school girl who was one of the newer students, when I heard the sound of a high heel come whistling through the air at me. It was a sparkly [Miu Miu](#) sandal worth about 30,000 yen that had flown off the right foot of my nosebleeding sempai. Don't kick with your shoes on! Not even if they're cute ones!

She had a harder time losing weight than others, so she was especially touchy. Almost like a wounded wild animal. But I actually knew the reason she sucked so much at losing weight. Or rather, I managed to guess what it was.

It was because she kept trying out fad diets. Fads like the [Mari Henmi](#) diet (or was it Emiri Henmi?), or the low insulin diet or the blood type diet. Normally someone would tweak the amount they eat and their level of physical activity, but for some reason, shortly before the match she instead said this:

Nosebleed Sempai: Oh, I'm so full!

Kazuki Sakuraba: What?! Should you really be doing that?

Nosebleed Sempai: Duh, of course I can! 'Cause I'm [type A](#)!

Kazuki Sakuraba: Huh?

Nosebleed Sempai: Type As can eat unlimited amounts of soba, and won't get fat! Hee-hee!

She's gone totally loco. The second I heard her say that, I thought I should let her know what I thought. But then again, I also wondered what would happen to her on the day of the match if she kept on doing that. So I gave into my curiosity, and just said "ohh!" and left it at that. Well, that fateful morning arrived, and I caught a whiff of green onion. When I asked her about it, she smiled and said, "Oh, that's just me! I ate a ton of soba again this morning!" I was starting to get a really bad feeling about this, along with some pangs of conscience. Finally, it was weigh-in time. She confidently stepped onto the scale, wearing just a T-shirt that weighed no more than a hundred grams.

Bzzt! Three hundred grams over. Shocking. (to her, that is, not to anyone else)

As for what happens to someone who's over the weight limit, they aren't allowed to participate, of course. She was a well-known martial artist and a favorite to win the competition, but if she's not fit to participate, then what's she going to do? Her only option was to run around like a madwoman until she lost the three hundred grams within the time limit. So she reluctantly put on her windbreaker and started running laps around the gymnasium at full speed. She ran and ran with this frowny face, like she couldn't comprehend why this was happening to her. As I watched her in that sorry state, I finally lost it and burst out laughing.

Kazuki Sakuraba: Ha ha, guess you had too much of your unlimited soba. Ha, ha, ha!

Nosebleed Sempai: ...If that's what you thought, why didn't you say anything?!

She was really angry, but then even she started to find it funny after a while, and by the end she was running around laughing. So she somehow managed to lose the three hundred grams, and got a nosebleed along the way, but she still won the competition. Strong!

So that's the latest update on the nosebleeder.

Now, what's going on with the Golden Bra? Oh, right! She did something kind of funny recently. I'll write about that.

[The Statue of Liberty]

She's a cool beauty ... by which I mean, she's really scary, the kind of person who can only be called an angel in white when her mouth is shut. The patients at the hospital where she works are split 50-50 into her fans who consider her lovely and proud, and those who think she's scary and don't like her. Both reactions tend toward the extremes.

But even a tough lady like that still has a strange weakness.

She has the tendency to fall for urban legends.

When she was still in high school, she would often pull out the antenna on her cell phone and start rubbing it between her thumb and index finger, then raise that hand up to the sky. What could she possibly be doing? "I'm letting the electromagnetic waves in. Look, I've got three bars now!" she would proudly inform us, like an old man who didn't know how electronics work.

There was also this game that was popular back then, which involved running around on top of white cubes that were floating in the dark. A male character was doing the running around, and she would say, "If you clear one of the areas, he'll turn into a female character, and the next level starts." Armed with her belief in this urban legend, she would spend all hours of the night playing this game. And then she also started claiming, "If you clear this part, then the character turns into a white dog, and it whines when it falls from the top of the cubes." Weirdo. (She also eagerly claimed something about the crows in Resident Evil changing into something else, but I forgot....)

Well, that was during high school. She's well into adulthood by now. I had already completely forgotten about those sorts of things myself. And then just the other day we happened to visit [Takano Fruit Parlor](#). It's a very tasty all-you-can-eat fruit buffet. She was

happily stuffing her face spoonful by spoonful with this fluffy dessert that had vanilla ice cream scooped on top of fresh blueberries.

Another friend was supposed to come with us that day, but she was running late from work. We thought she might call one of our cell phones, so both of us pulled out our phones from our bags. I set mine down on the corner of the table. Then I suddenly had this strong sense of foreboding. That sense was telling me that she was feverishly rubbing something between her index finger and thumb.

I was getting a bad feeling about this.

With great trepidation, I raised my head, and saw that she was holding her cell phone with the antenna pulled all the way out. And then, with a very serious face, she raised it up to the sky, like the Statue of Liberty. Our eyes met.

Kazuki Sakuraba: ...What are you doing?

The Golden Bra: What do you mean? Ooh, let's have some melon, too.

Kazuki Sakuraba: Sure... You know what, I've been thinking about something...

The Golden Bra: What?

Kazuki Sakuraba: No, it's just, I can't think of a good way to put this....

The Golden Bra: Something bothering you? Not that I'm interested.

That pose of yours is bothering me!

...But I wasn't brave enough to say that, so I just quietly left my seat to get us two servings of melon. The melon was very sweet and yummy.

And then, as for her *shachihoko*-like golden bra, I have some dim recollection that it had to do with feng shui. Feng shui, really?! Isn't it important that the color of a bra be something normal? I would think you should make it some color that's not too embarrassing to report to the police in case some panty thief were to steal it.

And as for how the original stone lion thief, the dreamy-eyed teacher, is doing these days...

I mentioned this earlier, but she's been in a frenzy preparing for the new middle school year. Her "hanyaan" changed to a "grrrrr"! I'm scared.

It's too much of a downer to leave it at that, so I'll just write a brief note about what she's been up to lately.

[The Rose Woman]

Before she got so busy, the stone lion thief invited me to Kill Bill, a movie that I had already seen, and eventually wound up inviting another girl to see it with her.

That girl is a music teacher who works at the same school. I've met her a few times, and she's definitely that cute, featherbrained, rich-girl type who lacks any worldly cares. At first, I had referred to her by her last name plus "san," but after a certain bizarre incident, this changed to the strange nickname of "that rose woman." That incident occurred when the stone lion thief and the rose woman went to see Kill Bill together.

That day, the two of them met in [Shibuya](#) and went together to the movie theater. But the stone lion thief later alleged that the rose woman had suddenly stood up from her seat, where they were sitting fairly close to the screen (around where they would get a close-up of Uma Thurman's feet), and then bolted out of the theater. And apparently she never went back to her seat again.

The stone lion thief had no choice but to forlornly watch the rest of the movie all by herself. And after she dragged herself out of the theater, hanging her head, she found the rose woman waiting at the exit.

For some reason, she was holding a large bouquet of red roses.

She was all smiles, laughing and crying at the same time.

And in her adorable, bell-like voice, she said, "That movie was so awful, I was afraid it would leave you a painful memory!"

The rose woman had run out of the theater, dashed to a flower shop, emptied her wallet to buy a big bouquet of roses, rushed back, and then stood at the exit, waiting patiently for the movie to end and the stone lion thief to come back out.

While I was listening to the stone lion thief tell me this story in a local Thai restaurant, I had no idea what to say. But then she said, “I love kind people!” and lavished the rose woman with praise. After that, she stared at my face like there was something else she wanted to say. Eh? Are you under the mistaken impression that I’m unkind...?

It makes me a little infuriated, and maybe a little envious, but either way, I can’t make heads or tails out of these stories. Weirdoes.

Well, enough about those weird people.

I’m almost to the end, so I’ll wrap this up.

Once again, I’d like to take this opportunity to thank my editor Mr. K-dou and all of the other people who have been of such great help to me in my latest writing endeavor.

Thank you so much to the illustrator Hinata Takeda for again drawing such a cute Victorique. I love how her cheeks are always so chubby and squishy. Her sleepy face when she’s carrying her pillow, her cheeks when they’re swollen with tears—it’s all so c-cute! I know I’ve bugged you with my sudden weird requests like asking you to make Inspector de Blois’ drill head pointier, but I hope you’ll keep on working with me in the future!

And thank you very much to all of you who have read this book. You make me very happy simply by reading and enjoying this sequel to the first volume.

In addition, I have a short story series that began in the May issue of Fantasia Battle Royale. There you’ll find Victorique and Kazuya running around all over the school as they’re just starting to get to

know each other. There's a special feature with a map of the Kingdom of Sauvure plus a bunch of other stuff, so please check it out if you're interested.

As for the novels, in the next volume, Gosick III ... Victorique will become [blank], and I'll reveal the sentimental reason behind the inspector's golden drill... I hope you'll look forward to it! That's all for now, see you next time!

Kazuki Sakuraba

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